

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM EALAÍONA, OIÐHREACHT, GNÓTHAÍ RÉIGIÚNACHA,
TUAITHE AGUS GAELTACHTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON ARTS, HERITAGE, REGIONAL, RURAL AND GAEL-
TACHT AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 23 Samhain 2016

Wednesday, 23 November 2016

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Ciarán Cannon,	Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Collins,	Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell.
Deputy Danny Healy-Rae,	
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	

In attendance: Deputies Catherine Connolly and Noel Grealish and Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh.

DEPUTY PEADAR TÓIBÍN IN THE CHAIR

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have a quorum of the required four members so will commence in public session. I ask members to switch off their phones as they can interfere with the broadcasting of the meeting. Apologies have been received from Deputy Niamh Smyth. We congratulate Deputy Smyth on the birth of her baby and hope mother and baby are doing well. I propose we now go into private session to deal with a number of items.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.15 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.36 a.m.

Sustaining Viable Rural Communities: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: We shall now discuss the topic of what it takes to sustain a viable rural community with representatives of FORUM Connemara, Teagasc and Irish Rural Link. I thank them for attending. Tá fáilte mór romhaibh teacht anseo inniu. We are in the process of developing a report on how to create viable rural communities. We are meeting approximately 49 groups from around the country. We hope to have one of the most in-depth documents and reports on how to build viable rural communities. What we are really asking delegates is that they give us a good picture of what is happening and recommendations on what should happen so we can include them in our report. Representatives of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael were also invited to attend the meeting but they were unable to do so.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give to the committee. If, however, they are directed to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statement and any other documents submitted may be published on the committee website after this meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

We will continue with our investigation. Stream 4 concerns the quality of life in rural areas. Since the representatives of Irish Rural Link took their seats first, I invite them to make their presentation first.

Mr. Seamus Boland: I thank the committee for inviting us to attend. We very much appreciate the opportunity. As members may know, Irish Rural Link is 25 years old this year. Our membership mainly comprises community group members. They are from some 1,200 community groups all across rural Ireland, from Donegal to Kerry. Our main aim can be translated into sustaining rural communities. That is basically what we are in favour of. We are particularly aware of disadvantage in rural areas, be it social or economic. That is our reason for existence as a voluntary organisation.

We completed a report, Poverty and Social Inclusion, in which Ms Louise Lennon was very much involved. It is a report on the realities in the past two or three years in rural Ireland and quite factual. We are indebted to work done by Social Justice Ireland and Teagasc. Thia Hennessy's work is seminal. The report states in a very careful way that the recession has affected rural areas in a major way. As that is not news to Members of the Houses, it is not a surprise. The warning in our recently published report was that if we did not arrest the decline, for many families, there was a danger we would return straight to 1990s poverty levels.

I will go through some of the headings to give the committee a picture, as it asked me to do at the beginning. There are some things we welcome. I will start with the issue of farm poverty and the farm assist scheme. According to figures compiled by Teagasc, average income for farm households is approximately €26,000. The average industrial wage is €37,000, of which average farm household income falls far short. The matter is complicated by the fact that previously, as is the European norm, many smallholders would have had jobs on building sites or part-time jobs in the local area. Unfortunately, many of these jobs have disappeared and the reason the findings suggest these families are moving towards poverty levels is they do not have access to such jobs. We have made some recommendations in that respect. There are a couple of items that could help, apart from the rural development programme which is in place but which might not always affect the smallholder. The farm assist means test which was widened a little in the last budget, which we welcomed, is the most critical and strict across the social welfare system. There is a reason for this. It includes assets because if a person has assets worth X amount, why should he or she receive social welfare payments? However, being asset rich and cash poor causes many problems.

Those participating in the farm assist scheme have other problems, health and otherwise, with which they cannot deal. We strongly suggest what was done in the budget, which we welcomed, be looked at and that the farm assist scheme be completely reviewed to reflect the realities of the day. Sometimes a person is assessed based on last year's income. That is an issue because the problems have arisen this year, but he or she cannot be assessed on that basis. It is not a matter of making it easier for people to fool the system and obtain money they do not deserve. Many of those participating in the farm assist scheme - the number is approximately 8,000 but it should be 20,000 - are in that position because they are at the very bottom level. We are seeking a complete review of the scheme to reflect the realities for them.

We welcome the rural social scheme, for which the former Minister, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuí, was very much responsible. The waiting list is approximately 2,500. An extra 500 places were added this year, which we welcome, but there is huge demand. Both schemes could strongly improve the normal daily reality for approximately 20,000 farm households at that level.

As Irish Rural Link is very much involved in the wider rural agenda, I will discuss the issue of rural transport next. The community rural transport scheme has been the backbone of the lives of people, especially older people, in communities. In the early days it was a method to bring people out of confinement in their homes. The matter has been reviewed in the past few years and the number of transport groups reduced from 37 to 20, although there is a question about the 20 figure as it is either 19 or 20, depending on how one looks at one of the regions. The budget has been increased this year from €9 million to €11 million. It was supposed to be €18 million in the good old days when we were discussing what it should be in 2016. Again, it is a social inclusion programme which is now run by the National Transport Authority which, to be clear, is very reputable and doing a good job. However, the challenge is how to manage a social inclusion project under a very strict transport programme.

This is no reflection on the National Transport Authority, but I will give an example in making our argument. Let us say a bus travels up the mountain and elsewhere or that there is a car system in place. There are various systems which could be used. Let us say John catches the bus every morning but one day he is not there when he is expected to be. He never fails to turn up. Previously, when there were fewer restrictions, the driver would simply have driven down to his house to find out what was happening and whether he was awake and so forth. Unfortunately, in some cases, drivers found somebody such as John in a situation where he required immediate care. That was an example of the great flexibility of the scheme and it is the reason it is called a social inclusion programme. It was not necessarily about providing rural transport in the macro sense, but the scheme was in place to deliver a service. Let us remember that a large proportion of older people - their proportion is growing - are now living alone or are part of couples whose children have left. That is the reality. If someone is living in the middle of nowhere and something happens during the night to affect his or her health and nobody comes for days, that is an issue. We ask the committee to examine the rural transport scheme in the context of widening the social inclusion part of it in order that operators would have more flexibility to reach people who need assistance. It is a vital service.

Again, I refer to Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív. We would like to revisit the possibility of an evening service being provided. Publicans are suffering because of the drink driving laws which, fair enough, should be in place. Most of the people killed on rural roads are people living in rural areas; therefore, we do not disagree with that policy. However, we believe the possibility of providing an evening rural transport service must be re-examined. We could build on previous experience.

On job creation, I wish to mention Mr. Noel Kinahan who is in the Visitors Gallery for his work on public banking services. Jobs have been delivered in rural Ireland under the regional jobs strategy. We are not critical of it, but we wish to make a few points. The jobs tend to be at lower income levels and, in some cases, people are paid less than the living wage. Members of the committee will be familiar with the position in rural towns and villages which are still struggling. We welcome the unemployment figures announced this morning. Nonetheless, the rate of unemployment in the broad midlands area and out towards the west is still around 10.5%. The national average has dropped to 7.5%, which is what we will hear all day, but before the results were announced this morning the gap between rural regions and the national average was approximately two points. It must be tackled. It is welcome that the rate is down to 10%, but one can already see the gap widening.

In addition, the jobs created are not better paid. We know from our figures that graduates or other qualified individuals still depend on jobs created in Dublin. They are not emigrating, which is good, but they are still leaving their homes each morning. I was on a train this morning and the number of young guys in their craft uniforms or overalls was enormous. Apparently, we do not need plasterers and plumbers in rural Ireland. The building and other industries have not taken off. Clearly, there is a big challenge in returning to the creation of that type of employment in rural areas. Its return would bring people back to rural areas and would attract more services, which are suffering because of the lack of people with earning capacity in these areas.

On the question of public banking, this day last week we launched a very public campaign on local public banking. I do not have time to speak at length about the campaign, on which we have been working for two years. As I said last week, we have presented a proposal that is set out in the documentation. Maybe the committee will come up with a better proposal. As far as we are concerned, this is the best proposal on the desk at the moment. Local public banking

is the third largest banking sector in Germany. The SME sector was the only sector that survived the crash in Germany pretty much unscathed. It survived because its banking was done through local public banks. A typical example would be a regional bank covering a population of between 220,000 and 250,000. The money is circulated in the region. It is a bit simplistic to call it a super-credit union, but it is a bit like that in a whole lot of other ways. As the Chairman knows, we have been working with the credit unions, An Post and other bodies. We have enjoyed cross-party support. We have spoken to all the parties and we will continue to do so. We really want the committee to look at this example. I ask the committee to remember the reality that most employment in rural areas is created by SMEs. Our report tells us that there has been an 8% decline in that arena. This shows that there is a need for a banking system that looks at the SME sector. The experts on our team are not the only people who are saying this. It is also being said by people from Trinity College and DCU and people involved in the Sparkasse model. We ask the committee to consider this.

I would like to mention some other issues. Irish Rural Link now has a major network that it calls the meals on wheels network. At the most recent count, approximately 500 individuals were involved in the delivery of meals on wheels, mainly on a voluntary basis. They do a lot more than that, but they are being stymied by regulation. I know I am running out of time. I will try to finish after giving one example. A woman decided out of the goodness of her heart - she thought it was the right thing to do - to cook a meal and deliver it to a person living two miles away who was recovering after getting home from hospital, only to be suddenly told by someone implementing a regulation that a label should have been put on the meal. That has actually happened. A woman in Castlebar was able to give us that real example. It is fine if the committee wants to have regulation, but it must understand that the delivery of meals on wheels and the provision of other services to our growing number of older people needs to be regularised properly. We have made a proposal in that regard. The social care managers within the new HSE health board configurations could organise that, but they need a mandate from this committee or elsewhere in the Oireachtas to do so. The issue of fuel poverty is covered in the documentation that has been furnished to the committee.

Chairman: Go raibh míle maith agat. I thank Mr. Boland and Ms Lennon. The witnesses will have plenty more time to discuss these matters in more detail in response to the questions that will be asked by Teachtaí and Seanadóirí. I apologise for cutting Mr. Boland short. We are looking for presentations of approximately ten minutes if that is okay. I invite Dr. Frank O'Mara, who is Teagasc's director of research, and Dr. David Meredith, who is a research officer with Teagasc, to make their presentation.

Dr. Frank O'Mara: I thank the committee for giving me an opportunity to address it on the important topic of rural viability. I am sure the members of the committee will agree that the agriculture and food industries play an important role. I am sure that will be well reflected in the committee's report. I am sure all members are familiar with Teagasc, which is the State agency responsible for research in agriculture and food. We are responsible for agriculture advisory services and for agricultural education. I am the director of the research part of the organisation. I am joined by my colleague, Dr. David Meredith, who is our senior research officer with responsibility for research on rural development. Such research is central to our mission. Dr. Meredith has extensive experience of undertaking research on rural development and supporting local, regional and national stakeholders on rural development issues. He worked on the report produced by the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas and he was a member of the selection committee for the Leader groups. More recently, he has been involved in the provision of research in support of the development of an action plan for rural

areas. As the statement prepared primarily by Dr. Meredith has been circulated, we will not go over it in detail. I ask Dr. Meredith to pick out some of the key points from that statement.

Dr. David Meredith: I thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to address it today. I have been involved in this area for a long time. Much of my work focuses on trying to understand changes that are taking place in rural areas. The document I have prepared for the committee draws attention to the social dimensions of those changes. General processes of change can have an impact on individual places. I refer to the closure of a business or the creation of a new business, for example. Such changes are part of wider social processes and changes. In my document, I draw attention to the impact of the growth in third level education and the progression of large numbers of people to third level education. The document also refers to the impact of the feminisation of the workforce, which has been ongoing for decades, and to changes in the locational preferences of enterprises and the restructuring of the economy which is associated with that. Some sectors are growing relatively more quickly than others.

Larger proportions of younger people have been progressing onto third level education. There was a gender difference in the past when more women than men went onto third level education, but those numbers have started to come into line with each other since the onset of the recession. The implication for rural areas is that when young people go onto third level education, they leave such areas and move to cities or larger towns where third level institutes are located. After they have completed their courses, they tend to stay in those urban centres to start their careers. Jobs in the areas in which young people are educated and trained tend to be available in such places. This gives rise to the feminisation of the workforce. As I have said, larger proportions of women have traditionally gone onto third level education. A point in time is reached when people who have entered the labour force form households. Now that there are such high levels of male and female participation, it is very difficult for people to choose a residential location based on just one person's work location. Two people who are living together have to think about how both of them can get to work. When one undertakes a spatial analysis of the patterns of where people live, particularly in certain demographic cohorts, one finds that dual-income households are highly concentrated in and around city areas. When one looks at the distribution of young children, one finds obviously enough that they are in the same places because they are in the same households. However, outside of these places one finds relatively few younger people and as a consequence fewer and fewer children all the time. That is the intersection between education and the feminisation of the workforce.

The location of work is changing all the time. Some sectors of the economy are growing relatively quickly and other sectors are not. Many of the sectors that are growing more quickly are dominated by female employment, by which I mean that over 80% of the workforce is female. By and large, female work is concentrated in urban centres. This pattern can even be seen within sectors, such as the manufacturing sector. Approximately 50% of male employment in manufacturing is in urban areas and 50% of it is in rural areas. Over 70% of female manufacturing employment is located in urban centres so women need to live close to an urban centre if they are going to be engaged in the workforce. That aspect creates its own set of issues.

This matter has a wide variety of implications for population change that I have already alluded to. Let us consider research on the period 1996 to 2016 that I have prepared for the committee. One finds that the overall proportion of the rural population has remained the same at 40% of the national population. The ratio has been relatively stable for a long time. When one digs behind the figure one finds that the rural population is unevenly distributed across the base and is increasingly concentrated in areas that are either close to or accessible to cities. One

finds that more peripheral places have experienced very low population growth or a population decline. We have a large geographical area of the country that is less densely populated with fewer than 13 people per square kilometre. The very lowly densely populated areas were identified by identifying electoral divisions with fewer than 13 people per square kilometre. The average population density in those areas is 8 people per square kilometre. These places will struggle to maintain commercial and public services and that has a host of implications.

In terms of drawing our research together and pointing a way forward, some of Teagasc's work focuses on a number of different aspects but I shall highlight three and discuss the research piece at the end. My colleagues in Teagasc are working on the Options for Farm Families programme that looks at their options to develop their farm enterprise. The programme also explores and identifies options for other types of enterprise development. It is an intensive process that is undertaken in partnership with other service delivery agents in rural areas such as a local Leader company, an LEO or an education and training board. The system of bringing people and service providers together has been developed and we think it has a lot of potential. Teagasc has undertaken a piece of research in that space. We have a Ph.D. student considering ways to support those sorts of network development to provide a whole suite of supports that people require.

Rural communities have a good sense of exactly what is happening to them but sometimes they do not understand why something happens. They could be drivers of change in places that are very distant from them but are having an impact. For example, in east Clare a chipboard manufacturer pulled out and relocated to Austria a number of years ago. Austria is not a lower cost economy than Ireland but the manufacturer felt that it could get a better return on the expensive machinery by locating it in Austria in comparison with Ireland. It was difficult for the community to adjust to the loss of a substantial number of jobs in a very rural area. Processes of globalisation and how they impact specifically on particular places are things that communities constantly struggle to deal with. They are uniquely positioned to deal with and respond to those challenges but there is a leadership issue. Communities need to be supported in the development of a leadership capacity to come together and organise. I imagine, in terms of the hearings that the committee will hold, that it will hear from many communities that have a strong leadership capacity. Unfortunately the reality is that not all communities have leadership and there is a need to provide support in that space.

In terms of other initiatives, and this is where working with local community groups Teagasc has been involved in trying to add value to assets. One of the initiatives that my Teagasc colleagues have been involved in is working with Craft International to develop the *écomusée* idea, which is where one can add a tourism dimension to a food product. Any time we shop we can see the values that are communicated to us through images of particular landscapes or farmers. We want to bring that aspect to the fore and attract tourists to the places where foods are produced, get them to experience the landscapes and to take it forward.

Teagasc has developed another critically important programme on farmer health and farm household health. Unfortunately, the agricultural industry is very dangerous. As we have developed our knowledge and understanding of what is behind many accidents on farms, we have moved towards more of a whole health model. That presents a particular challenge because it is more difficult to provide services in rural areas than in urban centres.

My next point is on research. I am sure the committee will hear from quite a lot of people. There is a huge amount of research to be done on this area. A lot of resources are available to researchers but there are relatively few researchers in this space due to a lack of a dedicated

funding stream. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has a new initiative that is coming on-stream called rural renaissance, which links into the EU's major funding initiative called Horizon 2020.

In terms of providing evidence to support policymakers such as committee members, it is crucial that more research is done in this space on the specific issues that we have already heard about from Irish Rural Link, and I am sure we will hear from other contributors today.

I thank the committee very much for their time.

Chairman: Gabhaim buíochas le na finnétithe as an eolas an-shuimiúil sin.

I ask Mr. Terry Keenan, chairperson, and Mr. John Coyne, chief executive officer, who represent FORUM Connemara, to make their presentations.

Mr. Terry Keenan: Ar son FORUM Connemara, gabhaim buíochas leis an gcoiste as an gcuireadh teacht chuig an gcrúinniú seo inniu agus ár dtuairimí a thabhairt faoi fhorbhairt tuaithe.

I thank the Chairman and his committee for the opportunity to address them today. Letterfrack is a village in north-west Connemara that has three pubs, a post office, a church, a Garda station and a national school. In the 1970s there was nothing in Letterfrack village but an old industrial school that had recently closed that had a chequered history, which is the best way of putting it at this stage. We changed that dark history into the epicentre of a vibrant community. The local community got together and started a company called Connemara West that then went on to develop a number of enterprises. In conjunction with Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, we developed a furniture design college that now has students coming out to our small village to learn how to develop top-quality furniture design. We have also, through the company, developed a thatched cottage process and built a number of thatched cottages. They also started Connemara Community Radio, Foscadh and our company, FORUM Connemara, which in 1989 began the delivery of a Combat Poverty programme. This was one of the first attempts at partnership in the country and we have delivered many more programmes since. In the Connemara West complex today we have 80 full-time and 200 part-time workers. My colleague, Mr. John Coyne, shall explain what we do in Forum Connemara.

Mr. John Coyne: I shall go through some of the work that the forum has done and outline its background. We finish off with some recommendations as well. We have sent in a written submission which I will not go through in detail but will rather focus on some of the areas. As the Chairman said, the company was established in 1989 to administer the Poverty 3 programme and we are still here 25 years later. Obviously, we administer quite a number of programmes. The area we cover in Connemara has a population of just under 40,000 and covers over 2,000 sq. km. Structurally, much of the territory is very weak with poor connectivity, low levels of demographic viability, poor digital infrastructure, poor transport systems and a very narrow economic base.

The company has always been guided by the principle of a bottom-up approach about which I would like to say something. What it really means is discussing matters with community groups, individuals and businesses within an area, carrying out an assessment of where one is at a particular time and where one wants to go and then formulating that into a plan such as the Leader plan or the plan for the delivery of the social inclusion programme. It also means going back to those community groups time and again and reviewing what one is doing. That is our

understanding of the bottom-up approach. It is not what seems to be the understanding of some whereby one comes into a hall, tells people from the top table what one is going to do, leaves after half an hour and that is the bottom-up approach. There are a lot of people who believe that is the bottom-up approach, but in our understanding it is not the case.

Our board is a voluntary board of 23 members and the turnover for the last two or three years has been roughly €3.4 million each year. That is the average turnover of funding within the forum project. I will highlight a small number of the many supports we give to different groups. They apply throughout rural Ireland, I think. In setting out these supports, I highlight the value of Tús, CE schemes and job initiative programmes in the provision of these services. While one might have a manager and an administrative system, they cannot provide meals on wheels and other services. As such, Tús, CE and RSS are extremely important. We provide a wide range of services to older people, including meals on wheels, carer companions, support for carers' groups, laundry services, etc. One of our main services is a transport service. We provide both the buses and the personnel to provide a transport service to Clifden Day Hospital. The service brings patients in from throughout Connemara who have been referred by their GPs. We have provided the service for years and it is very effective. It is doubtful the day hospital would continue to operate if the transport service were not in place. Obviously, the HSE would have to find funding to provide it. It is a major service we provide to patients.

There is also an initiative between the LCDC programme and Leader which was established around therapeutic riding. The service started very small a year and a half ago and is expanding all the time. It involves the provision of a therapeutic riding service for people with disabilities to which some people refer as "physiotherapy on horseback". It has gone very well and involves quite a number of organisations such as Paving the Way, the Connemara Pony Breeders' Society, Forum Connemara Ltd., the Irish Pony Club, Ability West, Enable Ireland, the Brothers of Charity and all these types of people. The initiative has great potential into the future not only in Connemara but in other areas that would like to look at it. They are welcome to visit us in circumstances where they might want to establish something similar. We also provide many services for children and young people across 50 national schools and secondary schools. These include youth clubs, youth cafés, Coder Dojo, etc. The employment mediation service under the LCDC programme has assisted quite a lot of people with up to 80 annually being placed on the back to work scheme. Quite a number of those people have set up as sole traders in different businesses having been provided with a bit of training and a small start-up grant. We also have a lot of farmers availing of the green certificate programme, with 70 participating at the moment. They are all young farmers which is very encouraging indeed.

The current Leader programme has been cut by half from €427 million to €220 million. With about €30 million available for transnational and other specific programmes, it comes to €250 million. In the case of Connemara, it means we have less than half the money for double the area this time around. That restricts us quite a bit. If one was to take the Leader programme as one of the main economic drivers in rural Ireland, it is clear that it does not have sufficient money and is a very poor programme this time round. A lot of people will be disappointed because the overall funding will not suffice. Hopefully, the Government will increase the funding as time goes on. I would like to say something later on the rules and regulations on Leader and how restrictive they are. For now, I note that if one is setting up a reasonably big medium or large business, the *de minimus* rules that restrict aid to €200,000 over a three-year period are very limiting indeed. I acknowledge that it is an EU regulation, but it is very limiting.

I turn to the key challenges that affect us into the future. We have decided ourselves to stay

on. We have €4.5 million for the Connemara region for the current Leader programme which is just beginning. We are one of three companies nationally to have retained legal LAG status. In other words, we did not go in under the LCDC because we want to hold the decision-making process within our board. This has a lot of implications for rural development into the future. The idea of bringing all this stuff in under a council-led committee means decisions about places like Connemara, west Cork and Clare will be made away from those areas. In our case, it would mean decisions being made in the chamber in Galway city rather than out in Connemara. We are very strongly of the view that local boards should be autonomous in making decisions on the local area. After all, they are the people who put the strategy together and they want to be the ones to deliver it. Clare and Kilkenny are following the same approach.

Chairman: We can go into more depth on the other areas. The ten minutes we have allotted to the group have elapsed, but we will have plenty of time to discuss the other issues níos déanaí. I suggest we give each questioner five minutes to ask questions and that we will take all the questions together. That means the witnesses will be busy with their pens taking down the questions so that they can answer the ones which are relevant to them respectively. I will start.

Some of the key information that has been set out is fascinating. The fact that average farm incomes are €26,000 shows that there is a two-tier experience in the State. The Teagasc document states that 37% of farms are economically viable, which is a phenomenal statistic that jumps out at one on this issue. The new information I have not heard before and which is fascinating is the fact that the dual income location is really important having regard to young families and, therefore, young children. It is a driver of the demographic location development, which is something the committee must look at.

I start with Irish Rural Link and note that the public banking system is a no-brainer. There is no doubt about that. Other countries have really good public banking systems. That not only protects their banking systems but also allows for geographic dispersal of banking activity, which does not happen in this country. I heard yesterday that there is a change in the rural social scheme which will prevent people younger than 25 getting involved and people will only be able to join it for a total of six years in periods of two or three years. How will that affect people those whose incomes are challenged? The one-stop-shop is a recurring theme, for example, to bring State services into the post offices which are State infrastructure. The Western Development Commission seems also to provide for that kind of leadership, economic development and funding mechanism. Does the forum have experience of dealing with the commission or should it be replicated in other regions?

It is shocking that we cannot put together the income challenge facing farmers with the energy and environmental crises in developing energy generation through the agricultural process. I heard today that Bord na Móna is bringing in timber from Madagascar to fire stations here. It is shocking that we have the land and ability and do not put the two together. What can be done to make sure that we have far more energy creation and development within the farming sector?

Deputy Noel Greally: I thank the Chairman for allowing me to attend this meeting. I am not a member of this committee but I am a rural Deputy and I was interested to listen to the presentations which have hit the nail on the head. Over recent decades rural Ireland has suffered greatly. One of the biggest issues affecting it is the emigration of young people. I returned from the United States recently where there are many young people working in the major cities, most of them from rural Ireland because the jobs are not available here. This is affecting many rural clubs, particularly GAA clubs. Six or seven years ago there was only one GAA club in Perth and now there are nine. Dr. Meredith said, once young people leave the countryside, they will

not come back. That is true too of migration to Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick where they go to college, get jobs and stay.

I compliment Forum Connemara on the excellent work it has done in trying to create jobs in the countryside. It is a very successful company operating in recent decades in Connemara. I am very familiar with its excellent work. For example, it has supported Connemara Community Radio which is an excellent station. Mr. Boland mentioned the rural transport service and people who have a regular routine. Much can be said for the rural post offices. A postmistress told me that an elderly gentleman came to the post office regular as clockwork on a Thursday at 12 noon. The Thursday he did not turn up she tried to phone him and when he did not answer she rang the neighbour to go in. The man had suffered a stroke and was lying on the ground. That is what rural post offices do. I am bitterly disappointed that the Department of Social Protection is trying to make payments online because there will be more rural isolation.

I have attended many meetings over the past year about changes to the Forum Connemara programme. Why fix it if it is not broken? Galway is technically two counties, with the east being very different from rural Connemara. What was there should have been left. Where are the difficulties or blockages? Is it more difficult and does it take longer to get a programme through from initial application to providing jobs? I believe that what has been proposed will cause more difficulties in getting these programmes put in place. I know it decided to manage its own Leader programme separately from the county council local community development committee, LCDC. What are the benefits of that?

I agree with Mr. Coyne that the forum's board should make its own decisions. With no disrespect to the county councils, their function is to get the roads tarred, get water programmes in place and so forth. They are trying to bring this in under their umbrella and many of us dealing with local authorities find it difficult to get decisions from them. It is important to keep the local structure, that is, the board in place, as in Leader.

I could keep going for another ten or 15 minutes but my colleagues are waiting. I compliment the witnesses on the tremendous work they are doing to keep the rural community alive and trying to get the young people back to rural Ireland. That is crucial. If we do not do this, rural Ireland will die.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I thank the witnesses for being here and informing us so brilliantly about what is happening. Without them it seems to be ignored here. Mr. Boland saw rural banking as the core of a development process. Will he speak about that and what he means? Have the mainstream banks walked away, as it were? I hope An Post might create some kind of banking structure within the post office.

Will Mr. O'Meara or Dr. Meredith outline the demographic of people aged over 65? What do the witnesses mean by leadership and having no representation? Do they mean political or creative leadership? Where does their research money come from and why do they feel it is being undermined? They are right to say they need more money or facilities for research. Where will they find that?

What Forum Connemara has done is outstanding. It is like Government policy at work. I am from Mayo but spend most of my time here so I do not get the chance to go to Connemara except during the summer. The witnesses said they want better educational facilities which place strong emphasis on music. I have a problem with the Department of Education and Skills giving 25 points to mathematics and not to music. That locks into a thousand things about a

fully rounded personality, education, bringing people back and giving them a reason to stay at home. I compliment the forum on that and on encouraging the universities to do scientific research on the Wild Atlantic Way and the seaboard, and to diversify. That is a brilliant suggestion. It is like the idea of taking the Museum of Country Life out of Dublin. People wondered how that could be done but it is now one of the most sought-after places on the Castlebar Road. It is involved not just in economics and furniture making but also in the creative arts. I compliment it on that and on the hub idea. That is fantastic.

Why does the forum want to become independent in respect of the running, creativity and imaginative ideas? I could nearly answer this question myself but I would like the witnesses to say specifically why they want to keep county councils away from it and away from administering social schemes? That is not to undermine county councils. Can the witnesses talk to us about that? This is at the core of what we should be writing up in this report. It is a question of the independence of each area and of the people there knowing what is best and how best to get it. They are three diverse questions. The witnesses can come back on those points.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Cuirim fáilte roimh na finnétithe. Caithfidh mé a rá ar dtús go bhfuil ard-mheas agam ar an obair atá déanta thar na blianta ag an trí eagraíocht atá os ár gcomhair. I have great respect for the work of all three organisations before us. If our Government policy could be dictated by what the organisations have had to say today, we would be far better off in rural areas.

I was fascinated by what Dr. Meredith said about the migratory effort towards urban centres. The point is backed up by the research done by Trutz Haase on the deprivation index. We have seen the maps of the deprivation indices when it was used for the local and community development programmes. The red areas were all closer to the Atlantic. They were the areas most deprived and where there were greater dependency ratios based on one income in a household. The volume of dwellings with three or four people living in a household depending on one income was high, as was dependency involving younger people looking after older people, infirm people or children with disabilities and so on. It is interesting that the research carried out is backing up that view.

There is more of a Hoover effect from the urban centres drawing people towards those urban centres. That is due to the feminisation of the workplace. This is something we need to examine. It is a question of how to turn that on its head. How do we put the hose at the other end of the Hoover and blow people out again?

Over the years I have been critical of certain aspects of the work of Údarás na Gaeltachta. However, we have often had the conversation from FORUM Connemara that if Údarás na Gaeltachta was based in north Connemara, the people there would be in a better place because of the fact that the organisation focuses specifically on Gaeltacht areas and it had a policy of pre-build manufacturing units. It has been able to fund co-operatives and child care centres, etc. Is it now time to start making the argument that we need a rural authority such as Údarás na Gaeltachta working in the rural areas and giving the same type of support that is provided in the Gaeltacht areas? Would that make a major difference in bringing people back to live in those areas?

Another point strikes me with regard to the bottom-up approach. Senator O'Donnell referred to the success of FORUM Connemara. I believe the company has succeeded despite Government policy. It has come from the battling of those involved over the years. That is the reason they have stayed where they are and stayed as strong as they are.

Government policy has thrown community development out the window. It goes back several steps; it is not only a question of this Government or the previous one. This has been a process. Let us consider the demise of community development projects. We had the cohesion scenario and then we had alignment. We saw the cutbacks in family resource centres. All these elements of community development have been thrown out the window for a programme delivery model.

Basically, we have programmes such as the Leader programme and the social inclusion and community activation programme. The idea is to deliver the programme. There is nothing about the engagement referred to by the FORUM representatives with regard to getting into the community, getting to know the community, working with the community and coming up with ideas from the community. Should we not be moving back towards a community development model rather than a programme delivery model in rural areas? It could be based around co-operatives being set up in community areas. People in north Connemara are lucky to have FORUM Connemara. In south Connemara there are co-operatives in several areas. However, many rural areas do not have these types of community organisations. Could such a rural authority support the development of community co-operatives? They could act as the hub on which to hang the programmes and carry out the other work that we have been discussing.

Reference was made to leadership capacity. Is it not more a resource issue rather than a leadership capacity issue? Is it a question of people with skills or funding to support people with skills who are in a given areas to enable them do what is needed? I imagine FORUM Connemara and groups in other rural areas reckon they have the people with the leadership capacity but they do not have the time. Often, the same people who are running the GAA club are on the board of management of the school and are also running the preschool, etc. There is an issue around the number of people available but there is also a resource issue and we are not paying people in those communities to do the work that should be done.

I compliment the work of Teagasc. Some of the research the organisation has done, especially in the social sphere in rural areas, has been particularly good. The Teagasc representatives have suggested that there is a need for more resources. If Teagasc had three research projects that the committee could fund tomorrow, where would the organisation put the focus? What would it select as the three projects?

It is ironic that we have empty schools in rural areas and yet we have an issue in urban areas of schools being oversubscribed and children being unable to get in. The employment issue is the most prominent. It is vital to get people back into rural areas. Providing housing in rural areas is another major issue. Do the deputations have any thoughts about how to try to make it more accessible for people to build in rural areas or to how to go back to live in rural areas from a housing perspective? The idea is to get people back out and get children into the schools, which are empty, half empty or closed down. I compliment and thank the deputations. I particularly liked the thoughts on a rural authority and so on.

There are some great examples of education from GMIT. We also have Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge in An Cheathrú Rua operating as satellite hub. We also have the Mace Head weather observatory in Carna. It is a world class top-of-the-range weather observatory internationally. However, there is a fear of it being closed down. Should we be expanding these third level hubs and putting them in rural areas as well?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the three groups to the committee today. It is great to note their ideas up close and to examine what they are about. They are linking arms to help

rural areas and I thank them sincerely for their efforts.

I am amazed at the turn-around FORUM Connemara has given the people in Connemara. We are keen to know more and get to see what the company is doing. Many areas in Kerry, where I come from, are dwindling. Young fellows are leaving in droves all along the Iveragh Peninsula. This is happening in many places, for example, Kilgarvan. We are near enough to Killarney but, now, we do not have enough for a football team for the first time. Sneem is where the great John Egan came from and Catherdaniel are other examples. They used to have two teams each. Now, they are struggling to have one team between the two areas.

The concern is what happens when young people go away. They may be going for a short time in their own minds. However, when they go to Australia or Canada, they meet partners and have children. What will they have when they come back? They have weekly wages where they are and they probably have a home – I am sure of it. It is a major thing for such people to move back.

I will offer one example. Many years ago my uncle was mad about Ireland and Kerry. He was great at farming and everything. However, he wanted to get married and have money. He went to New York. He fully intended on coming back. After the first year, he bought a site or a piece of land in Kilgarvan to which he intended to come back. However, subsequently, he started having children. He had five sons. He is still over there and there is no come-back now. He sold the ground he had. That is an example of what happens when they go away. They go away with the full intention of coming back. I am concerned that we are in a downward slide and that we will not be able to get many of them back.

It is a fact that many young people will not take over the small family farm. They can see that it would only be a burden around their necks to carry it on and to hand it down to their children in turn. There is pride in the sense that people stay in their own place and hold on to their own place. However, they can see that it would be too onerous and that there would no financial gain. It is sad to see after all the sweat, blood and tears that older farmers went through over the years to survive in their own place. It is sad that they will have no one to take it on. That is the saddest aspect of rural Ireland. We must try to put a stop to it.

Small things can become very big things, for example, planning. We have restrictions in planning. I will give an example in Kerry where the local authority granted planning permission for four different applicants along the national secondary route. What happened? Even though Kerry County Council's engineers approved access onto the road, we found out that the National Roads Authority, NRA, was advised by the then Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in 2013 to prevent any more access onto these roads. Where is this driving these applicants? It is into a town where they cannot buy a house or site when they are trying to put a roof over their heads, which they are entitled to do.

Health and safety resonate very severely with me. We lost a lovely young farmer in our neck of the woods the week before last. He was a great friend of mine and I was to phone him the day before he died. I just could not get through to him but I will not be getting through to him anymore. It is a fact that there are savage dangers for farmers operating on their own because there is no help. Farming is purely a one-man operation. We need to do our level best to ensure, advise and help farmers.

In respect of the dangers affecting people in rural Ireland, any road can be closed in with trees and a load of hay. They say that this is where the whole thing is wrong. The Department

of Transport, Tourism and Sport has regulations relating to the maximum width and height of loads and vehicles, but I am sad to say that the roads are not to that capacity. If a load of hay or a high lorry is going through, that is within the regulations. What will happen is that a branch will be hit, break off, fall on the windscreen of a car driven by a mother coming home with her children from school and kill her. We need to address those issues. There are so many things.

Chairman: The Deputy's five minutes are up so I will hand over to Deputy Collins.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: My final point concerns rural isolation. It relates to the rule that people in rural areas cannot drive to a pub and have two or three pints. I highlighted this three years ago. A permit for certain people should be allowed on certain roads in isolated areas in order that they are able to have two or two and a half pints and drive. If they break the rules of their permit, they should face the full rigours of the law but there should be some facility. Many of these people will not know that their neighbours down the road are dead but for the fact that Kerry Radio has a deaths announcement every morning.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome all the various organisations here today. I will start with Irish Rural Link. I come from the community voluntary sector and have been involved in community organisations all my life. Irish Rural Link often came to us on different issues along with Muintir na Tíre and other organisations to fight for the smaller people in society. Last week, Deputy Healy-Rae and I attended the event in the RDS on community banking. Will the witnesses from Irish Rural Link elaborate on that? There is concern about how credit unions in a village will survive if community banking is set up in a post office, which would be our thinking regarding the way forward. I hope that is what the witnesses are thinking.

I have a bit of criticism. We all get criticism, including ourselves. It relates to the dismantling of Leader, which I will discuss with Forum Connemara in a minute and about which little was said by groups like those before us. It will lead to the ruination of rural Ireland. I do not know what the plan is. If it was not broken, why did they go fixing it? Unfortunately, they are fixing it and it is becoming more broken. It is a complete shambles. That should have been an area for which Irish Rural Link and Muintir na Tíre should have stood up very strongly and made their voices heard. I am worried that it is too late now.

I am also worried about what the Chairman said about the rural social scheme. Again, community employment schemes, Tús and the rural social scheme are bread and butter in rural Ireland and are being looked at and changed. They are making a complete hames of this. They are now talking about those under the age of 25 not being allowed into the rural social scheme. Six years is the maximum. I know some people who have been on that scheme for ten or 11 years and are absolutely delighted. It provided bread and butter for low-income farmers and fishermen, so that is an issue that should be taken up strongly. JobPath is a farce. People who are on social welfare are nearly treated like slaves.

They come into towns and villages a few days a week trying to sign up to this while a UK company makes a profit out of trying to get them a job. That is outrageous carry on. They might be available to work on some community employment, Tús or rural social scheme but they are not allowed to do so once they have been called up for JobPath. This needs to be discussed. The revelation concerning the rural social scheme must be looked.

I am a small farmer. I welcome representatives from Teagasc. The biggest problem with Irish agriculture is that while there is not a huge number of them, there are farmers who are getting a single farm payment of €150,000. That has been stood over and has not been corrected.

Some farmers who are earning a single farm payment of €2,500 have been further hit with severe penalties in recent years because of scrub and rock on their land. We come from rural Ireland. For the love of God, what negotiator went out to Europe and could not negotiate about scrub and rock on farms? The funding should have been given to those farmers to survive. I am very critical of many organisations that did not support the smaller farmer. While I do not believe the farmer getting a payment of €150,000 should be brought down to the level of somebody getting €2,000 or €3,000, because we accept that they are larger farmers, their payment should be brought down to some level where money would be given to the smaller man to bring him up to some natural level for his survival.

Deputy Healy-Rae spoke about farmers living on their own and the flight from the land. There is flight from the land and there will be continued flight from the land. If Teagasc, the IFA and the Irish Cattle & Sheep Farmers Association are not going to fight for farmers, who in the name of God will fight for them? These issues need to be looked at. I love to think that I could live on my own but I know damn well that if I depended on a living from my own farm, my family would starve. It is not possible. We are being steered towards the single farm payment, farm assist and other payments. They are being scrutinised so that if a farmer sells a few extra animals one year, he or she is penalised. People come into my constituency office who are losing €50, €60 or €70 per week. This is bread and butter for them and they are very much on the borderline. They have bills and face a major struggle.

I suppose I am running out of time.

Chairman: The Deputy's five minutes are up.

Deputy Michael Collins: I spoke yesterday about Leader groups. My worry for FORUM Connemara is that it has been good and a success. What happened to West Cork Development Partnership? It was a success and delivered. It was kicked out the door after 20 years. The mindset of the Government and the previous one involved getting rid of good community partnerships. I am very angry about that. FORUM Connemara has delivered a bottom-up approach, which is a great credit to it. In respect of what it can do to help the development of rural Ireland, it made a point about the tax code, for example, that one job in Connemara is probably equivalent to ten jobs in Dublin. Will representatives from FORUM Connemara explain that because it is interesting? I know it has delivered for Connemara in a very fair and honest way. The situation is very passionate. Leader groups are being ripped apart completely incorrectly and taken over by politics, which is wrong. My voice is very strong on that.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank everybody for their contributions today. I certainly found them very informative. I met representatives of Teagasc quite a number of times since being elected to the Seanad. Obviously, I am very interested in the implementation of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, report. What implementation has happened so far with regards to the report? Teagasc played an important role in contributing to its development. The focus of what we are discussing today - sustaining viable world communities - is the basis of that report. One of the key recommendations was to appoint a senior Cabinet Minister with responsibility for regional development, which has happened. However, we need to know that positive changes are happening within communities with that bottom-up approach.

I live in a rural area of Roscommon and am involved in my own community. Roscommon County Council has established town teams across the county to work on that bottom-up approach. I attended a meeting last night in Ballaghadereen as part of the town team committee.

One of the challenges I have seen, and which Teagasc has also identified, concerns leadership within communities. That bottom-up approach needs leaders and committee members who demonstrate a sense of honesty, solidarity, team-work and focus. How can we have a programme in place to ensure that people within communities are constructive in that approach? I say that as someone who is involved in such a committee myself.

Funding for the town and village scheme appears to be working through local authorities and filtering into towns. It is about getting people on board and educating them, but how do we do that in different communities? What is working at the moment in that regard? I am sure that we have many such examples.

The agri-food sector is important for sustaining rural economies. I was at a Teagasc briefing yesterday and it is clear that it plays an important research role, as well as providing an advisory service to deliver research implementation on the ground. Agriculture has moved towards more efficiency which is necessary because farm prices are difficult and farmers are currently operating on tight margins. I was interested in what Teagasc had to say about the development of the food industry. I am currently involved with a group that is trying to develop a food hub to involve added value. I am also interested in the statistics Teagasc cited based on research carried out in 2011, which showed that 63% of farmers were not interested in the development of a diversified enterprise. Have there been changes since then or how can we move towards a more diversified enterprise system?

I attended Irish Rural Link's conference in Athlone which was informative, with a specific focus on agriculture and the public banking sector. Mr. Boland emphasised the rural transport programme, which is a big issue. I live in north Roscommon which is an isolated rural area with an older demographic. FORUM Connemara's representatives mentioned people living on their own. Mr. Boland spoke about assessing value for money and while this may not give value in monetary terms, it is important for those using the programme. What sort of assessment is required therefore?

Chairman: The Senator's five minutes are coming to an end. There is also a mobile phone interrupting the sound system.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Can I conclude that point? What sort of assessment do we need to provide the best possible evidence? A proper rural transport system is required, but how do we get that evidence?

Chairman: It is now over to the witnesses. Whoever wants to start first could perhaps address the questions that were put to them. Maybe Irish Rural Link could begin.

Mr. Seamus Boland: The first question raised by Senator Hopkins and Deputy Grealish concerned the RSS limitations. We are really and truly devastated. Let us take the logic of what is so wrong with this, beginning with the under-25s. These young people are starting out and trying to get going, so the last thing they needed was this put on top of them. Effectively, it tells them that they cannot participate at all and therefore cannot get started. It discourages young people from becoming involved in farming.

The logic surrounding the six-year period is even worse, so they will have to re-examine the whole programme. If people are told that they will only have six years on this programme, after which their income will still be below average, they will go back to the same type of poverty as before. This is against the spirit of the rural social scheme. It should be recalled that it is an

under-employment programme and was not supposed to be like CE or the other programmes. If not, it should be left as it is. However, if it is going to be turned into that kind of scheme, one needs to find out what will happen to the person after six years. What is being said in this respect to under-25 year olds who might get involved in farming?

A question was asked about energy. There is a lack of policy for allowing farmers to develop energy projects, even using their own land. That is linked to co-operative programmes and an energy co-operative would be a good development. For example, Tipperary Energy does a lot of work in this regard. That could be replicated and should be examined as a wider energy solution.

A number of committee members, including Senator Ó Clochartaigh, spoke about replicating the work of the WDC or Údaras na Gaeltachta. The Buchanan report on regional development was published in the early 1960s but it should now be reconsidered. It goes back to the banking issue, including developing a strong region either by the WDC or other means. Each region needs an economic generator, which is the solution.

I was asked what sort of assessment was needed for the rural transport programme. Let me be clear that it is a social conclusion project. In my opinion, the value for money report was too narrow. It examined expenditure but did not consider the value afforded to those gaining the services. Therefore, the assessment should look at social inclusion as well as what the rural community transport programme offers in terms of other services. In addition, it should examine how the transport service can be widened to include other social services, including bringing people to visit in the evenings. The joint committee is seeking an assessment in that regard. The value for money report was much too strict and resulted in the programme being frozen. The freeze needs to come to an end.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell, among other Senators and Deputies, asked about rural banking services. I do not have enough time to address the issue in detail, but I would be pleased to meet the Senator to discuss it. She is concerned about post offices and credit unions. We favour the Sparkasse model in place in Germany, although local community banking services operate in most European countries. We have proposed the establishment of eight regional banks, each of which would be autonomous and manage its own financial and banking operations and related matters. They would, by and large, lend to the small and medium enterprise, SME, sector, which means that they would not encroach on the territory of credit unions. They would not be designed to compete with or cause problems for credit unions. The German version of a credit union, known as a co-operative, works hand in hand with local or regional banks. In Ireland, some credit unions have considerable finance, some of which could be channelled through the banking system and managed in that way. That would strengthen the credit unions' role locally and ensure a wider pot of funding would become available. We have proposed that this model be explored. I do not propose to offer 101 answers to all of the questions asked. Once the proposed exploration was completed, a better model might emerge. In that regard, I thank the Chairman for pointing out that this is a no-brainer. In the 1970s we had ACC Bank and ICC Bank and I was a beneficiary of the former. I walked into a branch as a long-haired 18 year old looking for £500 to set up a small piggery. No one else would even let me in the door, never mind consider giving me a loan. However, I had a business plan and an adviser from ACOT, the body that preceded Teagasc, and the only institution that was willing to lend to me was ACC Bank.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell asked what was wrong with the banking system. The problem is that it has reverted to type. While the new regulations have been introduced for good

reason, they mean that banks can no longer show flexibility. Local banking offers relationship banking, which costs far too much money for mainstream banks. If I lend a person money, I will want to visit the person to whom I had made the loan a year later to see how he or she is getting on, whether he or she is in trouble and so forth. This approach costs money, but it can be done under the relationship banking model we are proposing and which the SME sector needs.

Deputy Michael Collins referred to the Leader programme and Irish Rural Link. We spoke out strongly on this issue, as did other organisations. Irish Rural Link is a national, voluntary community organisation. We would love to be more involved in the process of negotiating the rural development programme and assume a role similar to that performed by the major farm organisations. At the time we stated we had fears about the Leader programme. I do not disagree with anything Deputy Michael Collins said on the topic.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae referred to planning, an issue that needs to be examined. Complaints are being made about planning, especially by small businesses, some of which are being asked not to establish businesses on farms and to move instead into major towns. The problem is that many such businesses are more suited to a farm premises than an industrial estate in a different location.

I apologise sincerely if I have overlooked some of the questions asked. Irish Rural Link is available to discuss any issue with individual members or political parties. I acknowledge the work done by Ms Louise Lennon and Mr. Noel Kinahan who accompanied me. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before the joint committee.

Chairman: I ask Dr. Meredith and Dr. O'Mara to respond to the questions put to Teagasc.

Dr. David Meredith: I will respond, first, to some of the specific questions asked.

Senator Maura Hopkins asked what elements of the report by the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, had been implemented. I will point to three things in that regard. On the governance organisational aspects, while it may not appear important, it is very important that we have an assistant secretary with responsibility for rural affairs. The individual in question is responsible for five programmes which are very important to rural communities. Associated with this unit is a specific person who is working on rural policy. The unit has a professional role in this space on an ongoing basis. Although this initiative will be very much under the radar for most people, it is important in the long term.

On some of the particular recommendations that were implemented, the rural energy generation scheme has been piloted and moved into the second phase. The scheme was close to my heart because I conducted the research on it. As such, it was great to see it being implemented. Other things have also been implemented.

CEDRA has highlighted that many rural towns have been struggling for some time and also notes their importance to rural areas and communities and *vice versa*. For a time, an interdepartmental working group was engaged in this area, although I understand it has been superseded by the Cabinet committee which has since been formed, but I am open to correction.

The Senator asked about diversification. No additional research has been undertaken recently on that issue.

The Chairman asked about energy production using the farm process. There are a variety of means to produce energy. The Chairman referred to forestry, an area in which I supervised

some research. What we see happening is that people are incentivised to begin to engage in forestry and it can make a great deal of economic sense to do so. For example, in many areas it is more profitable to plant trees than to produce beef. For a variety of reasons, however, people do not engage. What we see through the adoption process is that a small group of people initially plant trees. They are followed by others, at which point planting tails off, which means that one has a curve where the level of forestry increases before beginning to decline. This points to two possibilities, the first of which is that the land considered good for forestry has been exhausted, in other words, it has all been planted, while the second is that the population who will consider engaging in forestry has been exhausted and no one else is willing to do so. There are cultural reasons for this, in that many people do not want to plant land with trees as they view land as being for food production. There is also the permanency rule, under which those who engage in forestry must replant forever and the land cannot be reconverted to pasture. People thinking about farm succession do not want to tie the hands of the next generation.

There is also a wider context in forestry. Much of the land that would be considered ideal for forestry is also classified as high nature value farmland, which is of particular importance to EU policy frameworks and sustaining it in terms of the provision of support for biodiversity. There are many demands on land use and some of the land that may be considered ideal for forestry is also being used to produce other things that are of importance to society.

Many members referred to the issues of migration and emigration. This is one of the areas on which I would focus in a research project. The issue is not so much about the people who leave but those who return. We need to have a better understanding of their experiences and the challenges they face when returning to rural communities, in particular, how dual income households have managed this process. There is evidence elsewhere in Europe that it results in enterprise creation because in many instances people who return must create their own jobs. While one partner may be returning to take over a farm or family business, the other will need to create a job for himself or herself. This can have benefits and there is evidence from Scotland to this effect. I would definitely study this issue, specifically the experiences of those returning-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Is Dr. Meredith speaking about the research area?

Dr. David Meredith: That would be one of them. We look at the experiences of people returning in terms of how they managed that process and what supports they needed and so on.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: What we learn from it.

Dr. David Meredith: Yes.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Where does the funding for that research come from if there is a gap in Teagasc funding?

Dr. David Meredith: I will come back to that point separately. In terms of the other aspect of emigration and migration, it is important to point out that as young people leave older people return such that even in areas that are experiencing aggregate population decline there is migration, but of people over 55 years of age. We do not know the reason for this but my guess is that it relates to older people returning to take over a family business or farm or to take on caring responsibilities for elderly relatives. It is also possible that people are retiring to the countryside. All of that points to the fact that people are able to do this at a particular point in their lives, perhaps because they are secure in their career or may be retired.

Senator Ó Clochartaigh mentioned the Trutz Haase deprivation index. It is an incredibly useful tool. It was the basis on which the funding was allocated to the Leader programme this time round. It is an evidenced-based tool which we can all look to and evaluate. I have had discussions with Trutz Haase on the development of the deprivation index, which is where the next piece of research comes in. A lot of deprivation in rural areas is deprivation of opportunity. In other words it is about distance from places or accessibility to services. This needs to be brought into that index, in my view, so that we are not only looking at solely socioeconomic deprivation but also the deprivation of opportunity, which is critical and explains much of what we see around migration patterns.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell also asked what type of leadership is required. What we need is creative leadership.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: FORUM Connemara is an example of creative leadership.

Dr. David Meredith: Yes. It has taken an innovative approach to the development of the community over time. There are other really good examples of that throughout the country but there are parts of the country that do not have that type of history behind them. For this reason, support must be not only resource-based but assistance-based to enable the development of that leadership capacity. Looking to America, the Ford Foundation funds a huge community leadership programme that looks at styles of leadership, bringing communities together, support networks within and between communities, strategy development and, most important, how to link that strategy development to the funding ecosystem.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell also asked where the gap is in research funding at this point. I am sure the Senator is aware that the challenge with regard to rural is that it is across all areas, including health, education, economic development, social isolation and so on such that funding is spread across many different agencies, with no focus on particular rural questions.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: There is now.

Dr. David Meredith: That is certainly coming to the fore. However, in terms of national research strategies there is no national research strategy for rural development. We have sectoral strategies, which are important, and agriculture has played a key role in developing the broader rural space and supporting it. Teagasc has played a particularly key role in terms of providing funding for research on issues beyond the farm gate. We recognise that our clients are not in hermetically sealed units known as farm but in farm households that are strongly integrated into the wider economy. Teagasc could play a real leadership role in this area. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is developing this area through the rural renaissance initiative but there is a huge amount more work required to bring the focus there and to develop that critical capacity.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Meredith for his responses. I now invite Dr. O'Mara to respond to the questions directed to him.

Dr. Frank O'Mara: In regard to the national research policy, the most recent exposition of that was the national research prioritisation exercise which did target funding for research towards economic development. Perhaps in that scenario research around rural development did not get enough visibility. There are steps being taken to address that, including a renewal of the national research prioritisation exercise. I am sure issues like that will come to fore.

In regard to Teagasc funding, the bulk of our funding comes from Government through the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine Vote, which is supplemented by funding we might win through competitive bids to Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine programmes such as the research stimulus fund, RSF, the food institutional research measure, FIRM, and competitive forest research for development, CoFORD, Science Foundation Ireland or Horizon 2020. The greatest squeeze in terms of resources is in the staff area. Like all public services, we lost many staff during the recession. As an agency, we were disproportionately hit in terms of the reduction in staff numbers. While there is some freedom in this regard in the context of delegation sanction, we are still way behind in terms of the staff resources we have now as compared with a few years ago.

In regard to energy, there are many reasons we do not have a growing energy sector in the country. We had great hope ten years ago for miscanthus and willow but for various reasons acreage in that regard has remained low, including because of the return that farmers can get from growing those crops versus other crops and the certainty around movement of the product. Vital to this sector is the availability of an end-user for the product. Forestry was also mentioned. It is an easier wait for a company that wants to buy an energy crop to buy forestry thinnings rather develop a supply chain around miscanthus or willow. In comparison with Northern Ireland, where there is a reasonably well developed anaerobic digestion sector there are few, if any, commercial anaerobic digesters at farm scale in the South, which may be due to the refit tariff paid on the energy. There are issues that need to be tackled if we are to get the bio energy sector going on-farm.

Deputy Michael Collins asked about the single farm payment. The issue is around viability and profitability on farms. It is a huge issue which we could spend the day talking about. In regard to the Deputy's specific question, our role in respect of the single farm payment is not around decision-making or policy in this area. That is a matter for politicians and the EU under the Common Agricultural Policy. The role of Teagasc is to provide evidence of the implications of various scenarios that might be under consideration. I am sure that the Deputy is well aware that the current round of CAP provides for convergence towards a flat-rate single farm payment. While a flat rate might not be possible the high payments per hectare are being reduced and the low payments per hectare are increasing. That process is under way such that when the current CAP expires there will have been a significant shift in terms of the high payments having been reduced and the low payments having been increased. It is important that the productive base of agriculture is maintained. Basic payments are a key factor in that regard. Without a strong, productive base in agriculture we will not deliver on Food Wise 2025 or for farmers and jobs in related areas such as veterinary offices, accountants, meat processing, dairy co-operatives and retail and distribution. It is not just farms that will suffer but all other services. With farmers, these services are the heartbeat of rural communities. I do not want to teach people here how to suck eggs, but one cannot overstate the importance of a viable farming sector. One third of farmers are viable and the job of Teagasc is to get as many farmers as it can into that category. We have to work with all farmers in order that they can improve what they get from their resources.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: May I ask a couple of questions?

Chairman: The Deputy can ask questions at the end. Another group is waiting and we are not even halfway through the meeting.

Mr. Terry Keenan: I will deal with the questions about why we want to go on our own rather than use the LCDC-led structure of the county councils, the most common structure

across the country. Independent evaluations of the Leader programme were carried out by RuDi in 2009 and Metis in 2010 and they recommended that in states such as Ireland partnerships should move from having medium to high autonomy. They stated the more autonomous LAGs showed better results in awakening dormant skills and potential, strategic thinking and monitoring the development of a rural area in a structured way. They stated autonomy, or the decision-making power of a local action group, should be further developed and that granting decision-making power made sense if the LAG was willing to exert it, capable of mastering it and allowed to do so by the managing authority and the programme administrator. A Eurobarometer study in 2012 of citizens' attitudes towards local government found that the level of trust was lowest in Ireland and Greece, in both of which authority was very centralised, according to the ESPON 2006 programme.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: What is the name of that study again?

Mr. Terry Keenan: The Eurobarometer survey. In Austria levels of trust in local government were more than double those recorded in Ireland. Austrian local authorities are much smaller in size than city or county councils in Ireland and local and rural development programmes in Austria are delivered by independent, autonomous partnership local action groups. We believe strongly in the bottom-up approach which cannot be imposed from the top down as those at the bottom have to believe in it themselves. Those at the bottom cannot do this unless someone gives them the power, the structures and the know-how to do so and brings in people to help them to develop. If a county council builds a local playground in one place but the local community wants it elsewhere, the playground will be destroyed in two or three years, while in the alternative scenario the local community-built playground will be looked after because people will have worked for it and bought into the project. It is about the intensity of the belief a community has for a building project. We cannot have people coming in and telling us what to do. How can someone else tell me what I know? He or she can conceptualise what my community wants, but if somebody is not digging at the coalface, he or she cannot tell the man who is doing the work how to do it. Somebody may have read a book or taken a degree course in the subject, but that is not the same as doing it. As Fran Cotton asked many years ago about the Irish rugby team, "You can talk the talk but can you walk the walk?"

A local community development committee such as FORUM Connemara has been doing it for 30 years on the ground. We have built from a small seed and developed as we have moved along. Putting our local action group into the local community development structure would be the same as putting the IFA under the management and control of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or putting SIPTU under the management and control of the Department of Finance. There are cross purposes and differing beliefs and ideas. The one who pays the piper calls the tune and if we were under the aegis of the LCDC, it would have the power and we would be told to tick boxes and go away. We were put under quite severe pressure to be under the LCDCs, but we stood up and fought. As Deputy Noel Grealish and Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh know, we are in the courts on another issue fighting for our survival.

Senator Maura Hopkins spoke about the CEDRA report and town renewal. One can repair the footpaths and paint every house in a town but without a viable living community, eating and breathing in it, it will be a ghost town. It looks lovely when one drives through it, but if people are not being empowered to help themselves, it will not be viable. Others can help, but they should not tell the local community what to do because one cannot help someone by ticking a box. People cannot help me if they do not ask and listen to what I have to say.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh is right that we have had a lot of programme deliveries, but

we have had very little community-led local development. Programmes are one thing, but one must have buy-in to move upwards, rather than downwards from the top.

Mr. John Coyne: I said earlier that the *de minimis* rule inhibited bigger developments. The Leader programme is also about smaller stuff and programmes. One example in Connemara was a feasibility study we had funded because two individuals who were very interested in the Marconi station. Through the Connemara Chamber of Commerce they applied to the Leader programme for funding and we gave them close to €30,000. As a result Fáilte Ireland took on responsibility for the development of the project which involved a sum close to €1 million. It was opened earlier this year by one of the Ministers and has attracted a lot of people to it. The Leader programme should be about small amounts of seed funding for projects that will grow into bigger amounts and which can involve co-operation with other State agencies.

Deputy Noel Grealish asked what the differences were under the new programme. If the two individuals about whom I spoke were to apply under the new Leader programme, they would approach the project officer who would determine whether they were eligible. Having filled in the expression of interest form and the comprehensive application form, it would be presented for a section 48 check to Pobal which would check to see if all of the answers were okay. At that point it would be sent back to the company which would send it to the evaluation committee which would recommend it and send it to the board for approval. The evaluation committee goes through the full file on any application, but the board cannot agree or disagree on it by itself. A member of the evaluation committee has to score it, sign his or her name to it and have it witnessed. That goes into the file.

At that stage the combination of applications is put all into one and the chairman signs that before sending it off to the board via people like myself. The board has to repeat the process and the chairman of the board finally signs it and sends it off, and that goes into the file as well. It then goes to Pobal for a second section 48 check and the staff will examine whether the evaluation committee, the board and everybody else ticked all the boxes and signed all the documentation correctly and if they did not, it goes back. Assuming that they did, a letter of offer is issued. I do it on behalf of the forum. It goes out to the promoter at the stage and he or she gets on with the business. When it reaches draw-down stage, it goes back for another section 48 check before a payment issues. There are not staggered payments for amounts up to €10,000 but for larger amounts, there is a section 48 check for every staggered payment and that is before the departmental inspector comes in and conducts his 5% check. That is fine for somebody in receipt of hundreds of thousands of euro because they can afford professional fees. Animation, which was the success of the Leader programme in the past, is limited in the current programme. Unless the promoter has funds to employ a professional, he is a big disadvantage. If somebody is looking for €5,000 for seed stuff, he or she would have to be advised to have second thoughts because the process is ridiculous. I could be wrong but I predict the system will clog up within a year. There will be so many applications that there will be backed up and that will slow the programme down. It will not run nearly as smoothly as it did the last time. The evaluation and board decision went through within a month before the business commenced. It will take months this time round.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am sorry I had to leave but before I left, there was a discussion about forestry. Are the representatives aware of the restrictions on planting marginal ground in places like Kerry? Can anything be done about that, given 80% green ground must be planted vis-à-vis 20% of marginal ground? It is the other way round in south Kerry. If someone is lucky, he has 20% green ground and 80% marginal ground.

Fish lorries travel through my village all day and all night. Why can we not have processing plants in counties along the west coast rather than exporting all the fish without being processed? Why can we not tap into that? Hundreds of jobs could be provided processing more of the fish being caught off our coast.

Mr. Keenan referred to the Leader programme and the bottom-up approach. I only hope he and more like him talked to Mr. Phil Hogan before he did what he did to this country and to the Leader programme. Mr. Coyne outlined all the stages that have to be gone through. His company can go through them because it is on its own but our Leader companies were not left operate on their own and they will have to go through the local authority as well. Even though Leader funding has been halved, my worry is that what we have got will not be spent at all because of the restrictions. It is like every other grant that is announced. There are so many restrictions and people required to sign off on them that, as I have always said, the money is not there and they are holding it up with red tape so that it is still there to announce again next year and the year after. That is what happening with the housing. It is the same with every programme. They are just holding up the money with red tape and restrictions and no man is prepared to sign off anything.

Dr. Frank O'Mara: I do not know the answer to the marginal land question. I am not familiar with the details around that. Increasing the rate of afforestation is hugely important. It is a central plank in meeting our climate change targets. It is the best use of land in some areas. We do not have a role in setting the regulations but we can examine their impact and feed that information to the Department and the forestry service.

The fisheries issue is also outside our remit. We have nothing to with water; we are just land lovers. The development of the fish processing sector is an issue for Bord Iascaigh Mhara.

Mr. Terry Keenan: The State is losing money because if we increased our community-led, local development through Leader companies, gave them more autonomy and linked them to the ESF and the EMFF, we would get more co-funding from the EU. We are, therefore, losing money.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I asked about locals banks because the witnesses have no idea about the hatred I have for the main banks and I am delighted with the response. I cannot understand that we have not heard Mr. Keenan on radio and television. He is outstanding.

Chairman: Go raibh maith agaibh. It has been educational and interesting for us. All the content the delegations have forwarded to us will find its way into our report at the end of this process. I thank them for attending. The committee will take the opportunity over the next five years, if it lasts that long, to meet them again. Míle buíochas as teacht isteach inniu.

Sitting suspended at 11.35 a.m. and resumed at 11.50 a.m.

Chairman: The purpose of today's meeting is to find out what it takes to sustain a viable rural community. We have representatives of the Irish Countrywomen's Association, the Irish Men's Sheds Association and Macra na Feirme.

I give the witnesses a fáilte mór as teacht isteach inniu. We are trying to get as much information from the witnesses in regard to the current status in rural Ireland and what they feel needs to be done to fix it, so that we can get their input into our report, which we hope to publish in the new year.

I welcome Mrs. Marie O'Toole, national president of the ICA, Ms Helen Rutter, regional president of Border, Midlands and West and Ms Anne Devitt, national public relations officer and press officer of the ICA; Mr. Barry Sheridan chief executive officer, Mr. George Kelly, chairman and Mr. Eoin Martyn, board member, representing the Irish Men's Sheds Association; and Mr. Sean Finan, national president and Mr. Paul Smyth, the policy officer from Macra na Feirme.

I invite Mrs. O'Toole to start.

Mrs. Marie O'Toole: I am going to talk about real people on behalf of the Irish Country-women's Association.

I have travelled all over the country in the past few years and it saddens me greatly to see the decline in rural areas, with shops closed and a feeling of apathy among people living in isolated areas. People in rural Ireland are fearful, especially with the closure of Garda stations, post offices and banks.

In the past the Garda on the street was a safety net for people, especially those who ran small businesses. With the continuing increase in rural crime and the closure of Garda stations, the people feel completely isolated. Most of these businesses have now closed as the shop owners are in fear for their lives, as nothing seems to stop the perpetrators from targeting them again and again. When the culprits are apprehended, the courts hand out suspended sentences in most cases. This is in spite of these people having a litany of previous convictions.

The closure of the local post office, which was always at the heart of any community, is a huge mistake. The person who ran the local post office knew his or her customers. When older people come in they would have a chat, collect their pension and if they did not turn up on a specific day, the postmistress or postmaster would assign somebody to give them a call. We have to recognise that today's post office network as a national asset and ensure its future by making it the provider of choice and the front office for all Government services, for example motor tax, hospital charge, local authority payments and so on, in recognition of the important social role that post offices provide.

Three hundred communities have been identified as being threatened by flooding. As this data is available to insurance companies we are concerned it will be used to discriminate against homes and businesses in these communities, denying them access to affordable or perhaps any insurance. Other countries employ various risk equalisation policies to ensure building insurance is available to all. This can be achieved for example through community rating scheme as used for health insurance or a central fund, as used for uninsured drivers.

Rural broadband has been bandied around for so long. We have to provide clarity on what will happen at the end of the national broadband plan, particularly in further roll out from exchanges, giving a commitment to providing fibre to all homes over a defined period of time and to provide technical advice and priority access to community groups who wish to provide a service now.

The closure of banks is adding to the mayhem in rural areas. Everyone is being asked to bank online. How can people in rural areas do this if they do not have broadband? It is sad to think of all the money that the banks received from us the taxpayers and now they do not want us to enter their premises.

In recent times, several general medical practices have closed in small rural areas and the

HSE have been unable to attract new practitioners. Sad to hear on the news yesterday evening too that 500 people were on trolleys in our hospitals. Our population is getting older. We are now only at the start of the winter and I can only imagine what it will be like in a few months time.

How can we improve life in rural areas? It is plain that the issues I have mentioned must be addressed. Apart from the all aforementioned, we should look after people in rural areas. They deserve the same respect and assistance as those living in urban areas. These are our people, there should be no divide. Give people in rural areas all the help they need to improve the quality of their lives. Let us get back to looking after each other and forge good community spirit, where neighbours look after each other. We also need help in support and leadership. The bottom up approach is a very good idea. I think local government should listen to people. People want basic help.

Chairman: Go raibth mile maith agat. That was very useful information.

I call on Mr. Sheridan from Irish Men's Sheds Association to make a presentation.

Mr. Barry Sheridan: The Irish Men's Sheds Association, IMSA, is a community-based initiative, which has managed to address a key challenge that health service providers, educators, and others have been struggling with for years, how to get men involved. The rapid growth since the first shed opened in Tipperary in August 2009 to approximately 350 sheds across the whole of the island of Ireland demonstrates an unmet need for which the shed model has been a highly appropriate response. Men's sheds share characteristics with, but are distinct from, men's groups, peer support groups and clubs, and offer an unique opportunity to men in rural communities in Ireland to improve their quality of life. With origins in Australia, the Irish movement has grown to serve 10,000 men each week in 350 community across all four provinces.

We define a men's shed as a community based non-commercial organisation, which is open to all men, where the primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and inclusive environment, where we provide a safe space where men can gather, participate in their community, develop social networks and potentially learn new skills and access information. We have opened 89 sheds in the past 12 months, that is 1.5 sheds per week. Every one of the Thirty-two Counties in Ireland has a minimum of four to five sheds. The Irish association of men's sheds along with Australia are viewed as world leaders in the men's shed movement internationally.

Let us look at the challenges facing those who live in rural Ireland today. One of the most significant challenges facing us is social isolation. Preliminary findings from the 2016 census show our population has grown by almost 4% since 2011, however there has been a decline in the rural population in every county. In the 2011 census, it was estimated that 38% of the country's population lived in rural areas and that 42% of those aged over 65 lived in rural Ireland. We are an aging nation, and current trends show many of our young people migrating to urban centres for employment and other opportunities. Couple this with the growing number of single person households in rural areas, and the continued and growing threat of social isolation becomes very real for many people. Community organisations such as IMSA address these issues and break down some of those social isolation barriers. Our most recent independent research indicated that 99% of the men surveyed said they met new friends and felt more part of their communities as a result of having men's shed in their local areas.

We are also addressing the challenge of integrating a very diverse population into rural

communities. Groups such as IMSA and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, ICA, have a very important role to play. Non-Irish nationals have brought a wealth of experience and skills to men's sheds across the country. Their experiences have contributed to our success while simultaneously providing those participants with a sense of identity and cohesion within their new communities.

We also have the challenge of maintaining or reviving strong communities. This can be achieved by resourcing community development organisations throughout the country. In communities across the country, local people are concerned about losing locally valued assets such as Garda stations, village pubs and post offices. Due to the links groups such as our have, communities are better integrated, more resilient, stronger and healthier. We encourage local authorities to draw up lists of under-utilised or derelict buildings which could be made available to local community groups who would undertake to insure, repair and maintain in return for a minimal rent arrangement. Working with the Office of Public Works, OPW, local community groups could also seek to repurpose former State buildings, such as rural Garda stations, into community hubs thereby enabling redundant public buildings to thrive again.

One of the major challenges facing Irish society is the health and well being of men. Traditionally, there has been little encouragement for men to take an interest in their own health and well-being. Most men are reluctant to talk about their emotions and this means they often do not ask for help. Because of this, many men's health suffers. They drink more, take more risks and suffer more from isolation, loneliness and depression. Good health is based on many factors, including feeling good about oneself, being productive and valuable to one's community, connecting to friends, and maintaining an active body and an active mind. The National Men's Health Policy 2008 to 2013 was the first policy in the world to identify that a model such as the IMSA model was an ideal way to promote men's health and well-being in community settings. Of the men who participated in our recent research, 95% said being part of a men's shed helped keep them healthy and 83% said the shed was a place where they could find information on health issues.

Losing skills in rural Ireland is a major challenge. The ability to share and learn new skills and engage men in lifelong learning is something educators and other organisations have struggled with for years. Shed members, as a group, have acquired a lifetime of skills, knowledge and wisdom, and we need to think of creative ways of harnessing and sharing this resource. IMSA strongly supports the notion that younger generations may learn from older adults in public communities and educational settings. Sharing different perspectives through learning can benefit all generations by enhancing social and emotional skills, and can promote personal contacts, exchange and respect between generations. Every day of the week, we see younger men interacting with older men and, sometimes, it is informal learning. However, informal learning can lead to formal learning, to the benefit of everyone in rural Ireland.

The potential exists, and our vision states we would like all men, regardless of age, have the opportunity to participate in a community men's shed. Sheds have an important role in reducing isolation and improving well-being and have relevance in a number of policy areas including health, social inclusion, education, aging, environment and community development. Increasingly, we are seeing enhanced supports from local development companies, education and training boards and local authorities in various counties. These local supports, coupled with the ongoing supports, networking and guidance IMSA can provide through our sheds, is essential to the sustainability of our model throughout the country. We would like the association to be a vital conduit in assisting sheds and their members in accessing appropriate supports

and we promote the inter-agency model of co-operation in fulfilling this role.

Mr. Seán Finan: I thank the committee for giving us this opportunity. I am the 35th national president of Macra na Feirme. I am pleased to be joined today by my colleague, Mr. Paul Smith, Macra na Feirme's policy officer. Macra na Feirme is the representative organisation for young farmers and rural young people. We have 9,000 members in approximately 200 clubs across the country. We cater for members aged between 17 and 35 and have six key programme areas, namely, agriculture, public speaking, performing arts, sport, travel and community involvement. We aid the personal development of young people through encouraging social interaction and participation in our key programme areas.

The Macra na Feirme rural youth committee is focused on developing policy and programmes geared toward young people in rural Ireland. The three main areas of concentration for the committee are rural and youth affairs, health and well being, and our travel and exchange programme. Macra na Feirme is affiliated to Rural Youth Europe, which provides our organisation with the opportunity to discuss issues of concern with other affiliated organisation across Europe.

Encouraging job creation should be seen as the pivotal element to ensuring a high quality of life in rural Ireland. A steady supply of employment will decrease the prospects of a depopulated countryside and will inspire more young people to remain in rural Ireland. To attract job creation to rural Ireland, an educated workforce capable of filling positions in these new businesses and a fully functioning and modern infrastructure are crucial. The regional action plans for jobs offers huge opportunity. Resources are required to deliver on the regional action plans.

In terms of infrastructure, broadband and the rail network as well as the regional road network are needed and must be modernised. The Macra na Feirme rural youth committee believes high-speed broadband in rural areas will help rural communities to prosper. This is constrained by the lack of availability. As day to day activities increasingly rely on broadband, the availability of the latest broadband technology will be the defining aspect in the ability of rural Ireland to attract business and jobs. Improving the level of broadband, by supporting the roll-out of the national broadband plan, will increase the attractiveness of the countryside and rural areas for young people. For the farmer who wants to register calves online or submit a basic payment application, broadband is crucial. A student returning home at the weekend who wants to submit a college project needs to get online. For a business looking to establish in a rural town or a resident of a rural area who wants to shop online, a fast and efficient broadband service is crucial.

The SIRO project, which is a joint venture between ESB and Vodafone, is being rolled out across the country. The project is delivering broadband by wrapping fibre optic cable around the ESB wires and is being hailed as the best thing since rural electrification. However, it involves the medium to large town and not the more rural areas. The map is very striking, with many rural areas left barren and losing out again.

The importance of an adequate rail network and secondary road network must not be forgotten. From a tourism point of view, it is easier to manoeuvre around Ireland with a better road network. A better road network will boost tourist numbers in rural areas and encourage more people to access the country. A modern road and rail network will assist only in attracting businesses and, therefore, increasing jobs.

Macra na Feirme calls for a full review of all timetabling on our rail routes to ensure com-

muter services are available on all lines and that they arrive in our large cities at times that are convenient to people starting a their day's work early in the morning. This would mean our smaller regional towns would become an attractive proposition to live in for commuters who can work in larger urban centres. It has the potential to take people off the road network and improve quality of life for people who commute.

Macra na Feirme feels investment in rural infrastructure and education are key to encouraging job creation. Leader funding is very important in encouraging enterprise and rural diversification. As a youth organisation, we feel the health of young people, both physical and mental, is a very important area. The level of health service provided in rural areas needs improving. Social isolation is an issue due to the geographical constraints of rural communities. Members of the farming community can live a long distance from their neighbours and that limits the amount of interaction people have and can contribute to fear and isolation.

Macra's rural youth committee has tried to tackle this problem by running campaigns such as the "know your neighbour" campaign in association with Calor Gas. We also hosted various mental health seminars and we look forward to engaging with the newly established youth mental health task force. Mental health services should become more community based, focusing on mindfulness and its importance. Mental resilience and coping skills are vitally important to both young and old people to ensure they can cope with the day-to-day struggles that present.

Rural crime is an increasing problem. Some 50% of young farmers who were surveyed as part of the FBD young farmer of the year survey have been a victim of crime. Another startling statistic that emerged from the survey is that 83% of young farmers felt they should have the right to bear arms to defend their property. That sums up the fear and frustration that exists in rural areas on crime. Macra na Feirme calls for a significant portion of the new Garda recruits to be posted in rural areas to help combat rural crime.

Action must also be taken to tackle high quotes for car insurance for young people. The current price insurance companies are quoting make it unaffordable for some young people to get access to car insurance. Our resolution is to work with the insurance provider FBD to secure a 15% discount for Macra na Feirme members.

From my experience, rural Ireland is very much alive and despite some of the commentary that exists, we must remain positive. We must promote the quality of life in rural areas and the benefits that living in rural areas bring including fresh air and views of spectacular picturesque countryside. Farming continues to be the backbone of rural Ireland and we need to promote opportunities for young farmers, but we must also promote more opportunities for young people in rural areas who are not directly involved in agriculture.

As an organisation, we feel strongly about the implementation of the Commission for Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, report. The CEDRA report is of critical importance in terms of the economic development of rural areas. We welcome the action plan for rural Ireland and the charter for rural Ireland which were published a number of years ago. We urge that the reports would be actioned. The CEDRA report has been published for a number of years but we have seen very little action or resources assigned to it. We also feel the Leader programme, under the rural development programme for Ireland, along with funding for the European Investment Bank, should be used to provide investment to projects in rural areas. The investment will provide opportunities for the development of small niche enterprises that will attract jobs and investment to rural areas.

Some previous presentations referred to flooding. Flooding has had disastrous consequences on both people's homes, lives and business and on farm land. We ask that further funding would be set aside for preventive measures to stop flooding in rural areas. I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to present to it today. We look forward to working with committee members for the betterment of rural Ireland.

Chairman: We will give each of the elected representatives five minutes to ask a question and then we will give the witnesses ten minutes to respond to the questions which are relevant to them. We value the information the witnesses have given us. One of the key elements for good and bad is broadband. If we do not have broadband in rural societies, they will be disadvantaged economically compared to the rest of the country. However, another issue is relevant given the evidence we have heard. This generation is a pioneer one with regard to digital technology. We hear every day about the necessity for broadband connectivity but one of the key elements is the fall off in human connectivity that is happening right across society at the moment. I accept that we need more broadband connectivity but we need to educate ourselves to use it in such a way that we also allow time for human connection as well, because if we do not do that we will run into massive societal problems and mental health problems. It is clear that the networks the witnesses have created are at the front line in the battle to maintain human connectedness, which is really important for the future.

Some of the figures the witnesses have given us are phenomenal in terms of membership levels and activity levels. The growth in men's sheds in recent years is amazing. One of the key issues is that it is very difficult to measure the benefits such community organisations bring to society. They are clear as day to us but when one engages with the State it is difficult to apportion resources if one does not have a way of measuring the benefits. What mechanisms do the witnesses use to measure the networks and benefits they provide? What funding do they receive for their activities? What influence do they have in the State at national and local authority level in terms of the development of policy? If the State or local authorities are involved in the development of policy, it would be very useful for community organisations to influence future developments. I would like to hear a little about that.

Given that emigration is such a big issue, does Macra na Feirme have an international branch? Is it the case that when people leave these shores they finish with their Macra na Feirme membership or is there an international body which then feeds into how people are getting on abroad? Often, when people leave these shores they are completely forgotten about or they are no longer part of the narrative of the State until they return. What stories do Macra members hear from people who have gone abroad? I will invite Deputy Michael Collins to speak and then Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the witnesses from the ICA, the Irish Men's Sheds Association and Macra na Feirme. They made very interesting points in their presentations. There was very little with which I could disagree but I would welcome elaboration on some points. The ICA spoke about Garda stations, post offices, banks and rural broadband. I come from a community where there is a strong ICA group on the Mizen Peninsula in west Cork. We lost our local Garda station and our two local banks so I know exactly what they are talking about in terms of loss of services. Losing the bank in the local village led to the closure of a big shop, which resulted in up to 16 jobs being lost. There was a knock-on effect within 12 months and the effect on the village is still continuing because people have to travel up to 40 miles to do their banking. There is no clear idea as to how to solve the problem in the future given that there is only a certain amount of time remaining for many post offices in rural areas because there

are no great prospects for the future. The only solution I have heard up to now is a travelling post office, but that is not what we are looking for. Reference was made to all the services that could be centred in a post office.

The witnesses also spoke about looking after people in rural areas, especially the elderly. We are in a very uncaring situation at present. Each public representative is fighting daily for home help services for the elderly. Why should we be fighting for something that should be a basic right? Why should we be fighting for something that could save us money in the long term? Instead, each and every one of us is fighting tooth and nail trying to get an extra half hour in the week for a person in need. It was mentioned previously that a blind person was getting home help five days a week, which he was happy with, but it was considered that he could see for two days and week and he did not get home help on Saturdays and Sundays. One cannot regain one's sight for two days which shows there is a ridiculous mindset out there. It is an attack on people, especially in the context of rural isolation.

The Irish Men's Sheds Association has done excellent work in tackling rural isolation. We should throw in women's issues with that as well, as some women experience rural isolation also. It should be Irish men's and women's sheds and they would have a great time together. We should not worry as they would be fine. Funding must be difficult. I was in Castletownbere recently where a new one has opened. It is fabulous and to the west of Castletownbere. What it has done for that community is second to none. Is funding a difficulty?

I am worried that there are many people leaving communities and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, ICA, must be like the GAA in that every day it must find it difficult to find a team or an ICA group. How does it find that issue? Are groups amalgamating, as I believe that is happening in my own area? It must be a major difficulty. I have two children who are members of Macra na Feirme, so I do not know if that is a conflict of interest. There are valid points relating to travel. If a person lives in rural Ireland, we do not have facilities like the Luas or buses going to and fro outside the door. One would be lucky to get one bus to Cork each day from where I live. That would be approximately 70 or 80 miles away. The charges applied to young people on those buses are unbelievable. I get quite a lot of feedback in that respect, as young people want to use the bus but cannot afford it. That is wrong. I believe the group has some sort of scheme that alleviates some of the costs.

I do not really want to get started on two of the issues mentioned by the delegations, which are high-speed broadband and car insurance. We are getting nowhere with them up here. It is astonishing the way the car insurance matter in particular has been allowed to go on and how our young people are being treated. It affects people more in rural communities, where we do not have the facilities of others in urban areas, although I do not begrudge those in such areas. The best of luck to them. We have people being charged €3,000 or €4,000 for insurance but young people cannot afford that. They are trying to do a little bit of work, go to college and everything else; they are trying to progress through life. There seems to be a mindset here to ensure that does not happen. I would like to work with these groups and others, and I know a Macra group that started again recently, which is great. These issues need to be highlighted and we need to move them up along the chain so the Government can start to understand that rural areas need the likes of high-speed broadband and we cannot wait until 2020 or 2021. That will not happen. There will be a service for the bigger towns, which already have a broadband service, which is ridiculous, as the rural communities need broadband. We have a mobile phone service that is in tatters throughout the country. That issue hits the rural peninsulas in particular.

It is difficult out there for people who want to live in their rural communities and young

people who want to survive. We heard this morning of the possibility that those under 25 will not be allowed in the new rural social scheme, which would be a major issue. The new scheme could see 500 extra jobs being put in place but somebody in a Department now thinks if a person is under 25, he or she would not be deemed as a low-income farmer or fisherman. That is another way to get people out the door and push them into urban areas. There is a plan out there. We have young people trying to get planning permission and they cannot get it on their own land. They are being chased off their own lands.

I come from the community voluntary sector and I am proud of that. I am still involved with 25 community groups and am proud of that in particular but it is difficult out there. I see the difficulties and the groups before us face an uphill battle. As politicians, we must support them.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I thank the three groups for attending the meeting. I said to them earlier that their contributions were alarming but very informative. I echo the Chairman's comments to the effect that all the "technopoly" in the world will not save us. We need certain savings but it will not save the relationships being spoken about this morning in banks, between people, in men's sheds, meals on wheels and everything else. We tend to concentrate too much on things that are not at our front door.

The ICA is an extraordinary organisation and when I think of feminism, I think of the likes of the ICA. There is much guff about feminism but we are looking at it with the ICA in 1,000 different ways. It has shown ability, independence, urgency and energy throughout the years. It worked without technopoly. What did the group do that was right? What was at the core of its actions? What made the ICA work and how did it work? What made the ICA work across Ireland?

I had the privilege two years ago of doing a programme on the Monaghan men's sheds. I went to Monaghan and spent two days with the guys, which was really extraordinary. I invited them to Leinster House and 18 of us had lunch in the dining room. I have a little bowl that they made and it has pride of place in my office. That linked me to the men's sheds association in everything it has done and achieved. The Chairman asked a very good question too. Will the witnesses speak about their funding? Is it matched funding? What about the independence of each shed or is there such a thing? What are the plans for the ground-up process? The logo is outstanding. People should have a look at it as it is just brilliant. I do not know how much was paid for it and I know some people have probably paid millions of euro for a logo but it is really terrific.

Macra is an extraordinary organisation. I meet its representatives every year at the ploughing championships. I have not had the privilege of living on the land for a long time, except for my postbox front and back garden in urban Dublin, which can be equally lonely and isolated. I have a 94-year-old mother living in an estate and nobody visits her. The only thing she has is the street lighting. Neighbours in the country can sometimes be far more alive to what is going on than in urban places. The Macra delegation mentioned the report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, and flooding, insurance and crime. What did it do about insurance and what campaign did it mount to change the insurance issue? We all talk about how appalling everything is, but what are we doing about it? The occasional person ranted on television, usually an economist or somebody working in the insurance business. They said it was awful, appalling and dreadful. What did Macra do about that? What did it do about the 83% of farmers who feel they should have the right to bear arms to defend property? I have not heard about that. How was that communicated?

We need to hear more, and not just from economists on television, radio and through other communication. What has happened in that respect? It is all very well to speak about insurance, which is major issue, but what has been done with the ranting? He is a friend but one would not get somebody like Deputy Mick Wallace lying down on such an issue if it affected him personally. That is a bit off the record. I ask the question because there seems to be much airing of what is wrong but what is being done about that besides having the odd survey? What would the groups like to do and what is stopping them from doing it? That applies to the rest of us and I include myself in that impasse.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank everybody for their presentations and I have a number of questions. These organisations represent what is very positive about rural life. Over the past few years I have learned about the sense of community that is still within our rural towns and villages. All three organisations really captivate and work in those communities to ensure there is enhanced human contact and increased engagement.

With regard to men's sheds, I have worked closely with the group in Boyle, north Roscommon. With regard to links, how does it work as an organisation to ensure there is learning from each other? I know of one particular example in which it has been quite difficult to leverage funding when making applications, as mentioned by one of the other representatives. How do individuals in different men's sheds across the country learn from each other to build on the concept? I know that those involved in the men's shed in Boyle believe their linkages with other organisations within the town very important for their well-being and personal development.

I have been a very proud member of Macra na Feirme for many years. As Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell said, Macra na Feirme is a fabulous organisation. This brings me back to a point I made earlier about leadership and people being involved in the community. As citizens, we need to understand we have rights and responsibilities. These responsibilities include making a contribution to our community because communities do not happen by accident. They happen because people get involved in helping out on a committee or at a church gate collection. Macra na Feirme makes a huge contribution in encouraging young people to take responsibility.

While having 9,000 members across the country is great, there is potential to do more to get more young people involved. Macra na Feirme is important in getting young people involved in public speaking and drama, as well as advocating for young farmers. It is advocating on the issue of the national reserve for the upcoming year, but it has far more potential and needs to be supported by the committee and others. We need to see young people contributing to communities because that is what will help us to maintain and enhance viable rural communities. This filters into all three organisations. There is a need for human contact and to make friends and connections. There is a slight selfish element to contributing in that people feel better in doing so and like to help out. I put this question to all three organisations. How do we get that message across better? There is more we can do to create a better sense of the need to get involved in communities. It is a two-way process and we definitely have a responsibility to do so.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: I would like to ask the Irish Men's Sheds Association a question. I have had an exceptionally positive experience in working with those involved in some local men's sheds. What are the biggest challenges in establishing men's sheds in rural and urban communities? How can the machinery of the State - local and national - help them in overcoming these challenges?

Mrs. Marie O'Toole: The Chairman talked about human connectivity. I know that broadband is really important, especially for young people but also for older people to keep in touch

with sons and daughters who have emigrated. Many of them keep in regular contact through Skype but human connectivity is vital. That is why most of our guilds or branches meet on a regular basis. I do not think it is possible to beat conversation and seeing people. Broadband and other technology are great, but young people have lost the ability to write a letter. E-mailing is so easy, but it is nice to receive a thank you note. I totally agree that there is a need for human connectivity.

Deputy Michael Collins asked about funding. We receive a very small education grant for our adult education college at An Grianán which is about all we receive. The Deputy also spoke about the loss of Garda stations and bank branches in west Cork. Our members seeking a home help service for someone who is ill tell us that caring presents a huge problem. The home help service has been reduced drastically of late. With the economy rising, we should be able to support the people in question. They would not ask unless they needed it. It is a lifeline to get some help just to be able to go to the shops for half an hour if someone has somebody ill at home. When I was in that position and availed of the home help service, it was fantastic.

We were asked about finding new members. We have a lot of new members. Strangely enough, we have many former Macra members who leave the association at a certain age. Therefore, there is a gain and a loss. I was in Dingle recently where one of the guilds had many members who had emigrated to the United Kingdom in the 1950s. They had come home on their retirement. They might have had to look after an elderly parent and ended up staying. They all had English accents. There were only three or four members who had a Kerry accent. It was refreshing and a great way for them to integrate into the community and make new friends because they were living in isolated areas.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell asked where it had started and how it worked. I will leave it to our PRO, Mrs. Devitt, to respond.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: And why.

Mrs. Anne Devitt: The Irish Countrywomen's Association, ICA, was founded in 1910. It was the brainchild of Anita Lett who, while sitting on a train with a friend, said, "Wouldn't it be fabulous if we had some kind of an organisation?" She set about forming it and drew in other friends. She was in a privileged position, but she obviously had a social conscience. The United Irishwomen was formed in 1910 and in the 1930s became the Irish Countrywomen's Association. It is affiliated to the Women's Institute of Northern Ireland, the members of which regularly come to An Grianán for courses. The association is also affiliated to the Associated Country Women of the World.

When I joined the ICA, I was aware that I was not just talking to the women in the room. If I wanted to get anything out, I could progress up the chain. I brought forward a motion that was adopted and sent to the Minister. I am from south Tipperary. Ms Olivia Hughes was a member of a privileged family. She got very involved with Fethard ICA and established the Fethard guild. Farmers were arriving at the market in Fethard cold and wet. She established a depot to serve soup and the women involved received a little piece of the profits. She had another brainwave in 1945 and set up the country markets. Again, that has taken off. One was established there and is still operating.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Is that Alice Leahy's mother, from the Alice Leahy Trust?

Mrs. Anne Devitt: It is not her mother, but Alice Leahy's mother was a very good friend. She was one of the founders of the country markets. The first one was down there. She also brought forward the idea of the horticultural college which was at An Grianán. That only disbanded in the early 1960s, but it provided a service. At the guild meeting, the member of the ICA had the opportunity to do crafts. Do not give me a sewing needle. I can do something at home but do not ask me to do it outside. I want to be stimulated and to enjoy myself, and it gave me that. It provided courses. One could do arts. One could get awards in arts, public speaking and so forth. One could get all types of little challenges. That gave structure. Behind the guilds there was the county federation. It has officers that kept in touch. All of that was very important.

It comes back to the question of connectivity, which was mentioned by the Chairman. It is so important if it starts in a small parish. It is keeping in touch with one's church, the businesses in one's town and the people. It is knowing one's community and the different things in it. The ICA has that. It has friendship. We were not saints but we provided a service and we followed up on people. Some guilds have contracted because of numbers and shifts to different areas, but new guilds are being formed and a new response is being given. Our agenda has changed somewhat. When I joined the ICA people were very concerned about children with a mental handicap and disabilities, as it was called then. One of the members of our guild, Eileen Noonan, set up the association for looking after children with disabilities in our county and made it a county organisation. There are schools for children with mild disability, moderate disability and so forth. The ICA people are a tentacle of that.

Chairman: Thank you. We must conclude by 1 p.m., so I apologise for cutting your time short. Do the witnesses wish to address any other questions?

Mrs. Marie O'Toole: There was a question from Senator Hopkins.

Ms Helen Rutter: We wish to point out that we are members of many other organisations within our community. For example, meals on wheels take up much of the time of our people. In my community, I run the Community Text Alert scheme which is vital for making people feel safer in their rural splendid isolation. Members might have guessed from my accent that I am one of the returners we were discussing earlier. I have a wonderful community through the ICA.

Chairman: Does Mr. Sheridan wish to respond?

Mr. Barry Sheridan: I thank members for their questions. Members asked about our funding, where the funding comes from and the challenges we face in that regard. It is challenging. Ours is still a young organisation at only five years old and we have come far over the last five years. Our rate of growth is phenomenal and there is no sign of it slowing at present. It means our organisation must grow with that and change from one that was trying to support 50 sheds to one that is now supporting 350, with one and a half new sheds being established each week. That brings challenges and places us in a new position.

Thankfully, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to support men's sheds so we are negotiating that at present. Hopefully, that will assist us in securing our medium-term future in terms of being able to provide our basic level of services across the board. On top of that, there is what we can do to fulfil our potential. There is so much we can do because we have a huge network of men visiting the sheds every week and many health organisations, such as the HSE and other bodies, are trying to reach those men. With the right type of resources we have

a prime opportunity to make a huge impact in terms of their skills, their health and reducing social isolation. It is a constant battle but in the progress we have made over the past five years we have proven how far we can go with very little. There is scope for us, hopefully, to receive the type of supports to make the impact we can make. That is the challenge. It is an ongoing challenge and we hope we will be in a better position in the next few months to do a little more for the guys on the ground.

The Senator asked about the independence of each shed. Each shed is autonomous. They are self funding and self financing at local level. We provide them with the tools to set it up and how to govern it. We take away all the pieces that the guys did not join a shed for - they did not join a shed to run a committee or to figure out how to organise themselves. We give them the blueprint for that and help them through that process, so when guys visit their shed they can spend time enjoying the activities they wish to enjoy and get involved in the community activities in which they wish to get involved. We often talk about the impact of sheds for men, but it is far broader than that. Each of the men has family, relatives or neighbours and it has a huge impact on them. Every day men tell us, "I now have a purpose to get out of bed". That is the reality. It is stronger than that in some cases, in that they have a purpose to be alive. That is what is happening in rural Ireland.

We can play a small part in assisting those individuals, their families and their communities. The communities are benefitting because the first projects the sheds will try to get involved in are community projects, such as helping with the Tidy Towns competition and whether they can build something for the local community. Many of them are building benches and donating them to primary schools. It is a really nice connection to give back to the primary schools, so the schools, teachers and children's parents are connected to a shed. That is the basis for it. There is a broader societal question we must ask ourselves in terms of what type of society we wish to live in. Sometimes we lose sight of what community is about and the role it can play. It is a tricky question but how does one put a value on social capital? The amount of social capital generated by projects such as ours and those of the ICA does a huge amount for Irish society. We are not harnessing the full potential within that in terms of developing rural Ireland into the future.

The Senator mentioned the shed in Boyle. In the past 12 months our organisation has introduced regional cluster meetings. This goes back to the question of whether ours is a bottom-up organisation. It is very much a grassroots organisation. Every shed is based on the needs of men in a community. We often get inquiries from a local authority, perhaps, saying it wishes to set up a shed and asking us for assistance on how to do it. We ask them where the men are and the authority might say it does not have them yet. That is not how it works. It comes from the men. Without the men all that is there is a shed, which is no use.

In terms of local linkages, it is very important as we grow that each shed has a local network in its locality. We are trying to establish a local network in every county, where sheds would meet regularly. They could meet on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and share stories, such as what difficulties they have, how they overcome the difficulties, what projects they are working on, whether there is something they can do together and sheds visiting other sheds. It is broadening their social outlook. Part of that is work that we need to do with local agencies. Thankfully, the local development companies, Leader programmes and partnerships, the education and training boards, ETBs, and the local authorities are becoming increasingly involved at local level, because they see the impact and success the sheds are having. What is happening now is that a guy might go to a shed and say, "I would love to learn how to do bee keeping. I have no

idea how to do it but where will I learn?’. They could go to the ETB where there might be a course. They might wish to learn how to use computers or to do art classes. It is whatever the guys decide themselves. That inter-connectivity-----

Senator Marie-Louise O’Donnell: It is cyclical.

Mr. Barry Sheridan: Yes. That interconnectivity and inter-agency model, and the support we get that way, is key to the development not only of sheds but also broader community groups. We work together on these types of programmes.

To go back to the Chairman’s remarks about the level of help and how we measure the impacts, one of the biggest challenges we have is the fact that every funding application is based on how many boxes can be ticked and what the impact will be at the end of the day. At a very basic level for us, the impact is that we are opening one and a half sheds every week. There is still a huge unmet need out there as evidenced by the level of growth. The issue is how we demonstrate that. We have introduced a new programme called sheds for life which is based around improving the health and well-being of all our men throughout the country. That will be monitored and evaluated from day one. We will be able to measure the impact of that programme and any other programmes we roll out.

I will now hand over to Mr. Kelly.

Mr. George Kelly: A question was asked about ground-up development and Deputy Michael Collins asked about women being involved in the sheds, which is very appropriate given that the ICA is here. We have had a discussion with the ICA which is very anxious to work with us. We will certainly reciprocate that because the first shed in the world was founded in south Australia by a woman. We would also welcome Macra na Feirme on board.

In my own shed in Killarney in Kerry we have started a project with a younger group whose members are working on the refurbishment of a tractor. Such projects offer huge potential for other groups. The ground-up approach is very much the ethos of the men’s sheds. Each shed has its own structure, as Mr. Sheridan pointed out. Our board, which I chair, is made up mainly of shedders. I am a shedder and am one of the founding people in Killarney. I was the first chairman of the first shed in Kerry. We set up our shed five years ago and there are now 16 sheds in Kerry. Mr. Eoin Martyn is a board member from Galway and he is also a shedder. Everybody is active on the ground. Our board is diverse and we have tried to include people with skills that we lack. The majority of the board are shedders.

We are encouraging the development of the social side of men’s sheds. We believe it should not just be about work. In our own shed we have made Monday evening our social evening. Sometimes it involves music or the rambling house type of activity. It provides a great opportunity for people to get an introduction to sheds and what they are all about. We refer to it as the pub with no beer.

Chairman: I am sorry to interrupt but we are running out of time.

Mr. George Kelly: We thank the committee for its interest.

Chairman: I ask the Macra na Feirme representatives to respond to the outstanding questions.

Mr. Seán Finan: On the Chairman’s first point about human connectivity and building hu-

man capital, that is the main focus of our organisation. Macra na Feirme is about building life skills and people skills by encouraging people to take part in our activities. The biggest difficulty we face is trying to convince 16 to 20 year olds of the benefits of developing people skills. Sometimes we find that it is only when people reach their thirties that they realise the benefits of acquiring those skills. By that stage, it is too late to get involved with Macra na Feirme. However, there are plenty of other organisations that people can get involved with at that stage.

Reference was made to measuring the benefits of our organisation. It is easier to measure it from a young farmer's point of view because we are delivering on our lobbying work in terms of getting more young farmers onto the land through our land mobility service. We have been working with the Department and working in Brussels to get measures for young farmers included as part of the CAP. Were it not for Macra na Feirme, such measures would not have been included. They were Macra na Feirme proposals which were sent to Europe. They made their way into the Commission's proposals and eventually found their way into the CAP package.

From a rural youth point of view, we do a lot of lobbying work on various issues. I will come back to the queries raised by Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell in a moment. We are also a charity, a youth work organisation. We are measured by the national quality standards framework so we must measure outputs and outcomes for our work. We are also aligned with the youth strategy.

In terms of funding, we receive a significant level of Government funding in the form of a youth services grant. We also receive membership subscriptions and funding from industry and from the dairy farmer milk levies. In terms of influence on the State, we do a lot of lobbying work. We are a registered lobbying organisation. We also take part in all of the forums that are relevant to young farmers and rural youth. We are members, for example, of the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI. In terms of working with other organisations outside the country for people who have left Ireland, we are associated with five nations which includes the young farmers' clubs of Ulster, the Scottish and Welsh young farmers and the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs in England. We hosted a five nations meeting recently where we brought all of those organisations together. We come together on an annual basis. Any members of Macra na Feirme who go to any of those countries can get involved in the equivalent young farmer clubs. Across Europe, we are part of CEJA, which is the European Council of Young Farmers. There are many youth organisations right across the world in which people can get involved.

I will now address some of the points raised by Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell in terms of what we have done about the issues referred to. On car insurance, we have worked with insurance providers to provide a 15% discount for our members. That is delivering a return for the members of our organisation. We have worked on a variety of issues through our pre-budget submission and our pre-election manifesto. A lot of the issues that we work on are, ultimately, in the hands of elected representatives.

Committee members referred to the fact that 83% of young farmers said they would like the right to bear arms. That finding came from a survey we completed recently. We have not had a discussion within the organisation yet on where we will go with that. It would be a retrograde step to arm farmers. There are other options that we must explore.

Chairman: Just to clarify, do they not have the right to bear arms already? Can farmers not simply apply for a licence for a shotgun?

Mr. Seán Finan: Yes but not to defend their property. They can apply for a shotgun licence

for shooting game and for vermin control but not for the purposes of defending their property, which was the focus of our survey.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is a very interesting statistic.

Mr. Seán Finan: Our work is varied but our lobbying function is a very significant element.

Senator Maura Hopkins spoke of involvement with rural communities and the Know Your Neighbour campaign, in association with Calor Gas. That is a very important campaign which we have rolled out for the last 11 years to promote interaction at a community level. Our clubs right across the country are actively engaged in all aspects of community involvement. They are delivering and are working with other organisations. Indeed, we are providing members for other organisations once they have finished their involvement with Macra na Feirme.

In response to the question about where we came from, Macra na Feirme was founded in 1944 by Stephen Cullinan and a number of agricultural science teachers to provide practical education to young farmers. The organisation has evolved over the years and it now focuses on the education and development of both young farmers and young people more generally. Macra na Feirme provides skills for young people in the industry so that they can better their own lives. They use those skills to provide meaningful service to their local communities in whatever way they can.

I think I have addressed the questions posed and I look forward to engaging again with the committee at a future date.

Chairman: First of all, I thank all of the witnesses for their presentations, the contents of which will make their way into our report.

One of the important themes is that material development should not be the only measure of development. We have gross national product, GNP, but sometimes I think we need gross community product, GCP, too. All of the groups here today fulfil a particular role but what is important is that they are a massive resource for further change and development within communities. We wish them luck in the roll out of human connectivity in the future.

I ask all of the group representatives and committee members to make their way to the plinth outside for a photograph. It is interesting that we have the three different groups. We would like to get a photograph of them in front of Leinster House with the elected representatives who are present. I will ask the clerk to forward to photographs to the delegates for distribution in any way they see fit.

The joint committee adjourned at 1 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 December 2016.